

A Double-Edged Sword:
Chivalric Violence in Arthurian Literature

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Abstract

Focusing on chivalry as an ideology, this study examines the ideas that influence behaviour in chivalric society. Specifically, it explores representations of chivalric violence in two seminal works of Arthurian literature. Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century romance, *Le Morte Darthur*, illustrates prowess's centrality to chivalry through a shift in chivalric culture in which prowess defines chivalric value both before and after the shift. Initially, Balin proves unable to distinguish between brutality and justice, two opposing modes of chivalric violence. Yet, due to his prowess, Balin is still portrayed as Arthur's greatest knight, demonstrating that chivalry needs to change. Balin's tale depicts the transition away from a conception of chivalry in which power equates to moral rightness towards one in which power is used to protect moral rightness. Malory's Lancelot then reveals that even after this shift prowess remains chivalry's defining virtue and power still dictates morality. Chivalry's violence is not therefore diminished by this transition but redirected towards the maintenance of control. Predicating its authority on displays of force, chivalry generates intracommunal violence, causing internal conflict and division. Thus this latter form of chivalry perpetuates the very violence it claims to suppress. Marion Zimmer Bradley's twentieth-century novel, *The Mists of Avalon*, demonstrates chivalry's influence on Gwenhwyfar as she is denied access to prowess and violence. Without access to prowess, Gwenhwyfar identifies with her roles as daughter, wife, housekeeper, and potential mother, all of which enable the men around her to pursue their violence. Ultimately, chivalry forces those with access to prowess into continuous violence in order to maintain its authority; meanwhile, those without access to prowess are forced into social roles that enable the perpetuation of violence. Consequently, Arthur's chivalric community inevitably self-destructs, regardless of the rendition.

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Introduction:

Chivalry in Arthurian Literature

Chivalry is prominent in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (c. 1469), arguably the most influential work in the Arthurian tradition. Arthur is commonly referred to as "the floure of chevalry" (359), Tristram is said to possess "grete myght of chevalry" (254), and others are identified as members of "the hyghe order of chevalry" (381). This association between Arthur and chivalry can be traced at least as far back as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136), which "took old legends and infused them with chivalric ideals" (Jestice 42). By the thirteenth century, popular chivalric romances were being written on diverse subjects, but the "first and greatest was the Matter of Britain, tales of King Arthur and his court" (41). As Arthurian fiction developed and became increasingly entrenched in medieval European culture, "King Arthur became a hanger from whom the mantle of chivalry could be explained and demonstrated" (Mersey 59). Even now, thanks to countless retellings offered through print and film, "Arthur has come to epitomise the heroic, more specifically the chivalric ideal" (Fife 5). Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, written five-hundred years after Malory's *Morte*, "rewrites the Arthurian legend from the female point of view" (McClain 197). Bradley's Arthur embodies the same chivalric values as Malory's, but her text offers a different perspective on those values. Through Malory's *Morte* and Bradley's *Mists*, this thesis examines three Arthurian characters who demonstrate the double-edged function of violence in a society in which chivalry was pervasive.

Chivalry can be a difficult topic to discuss since "the phenomenon itself is full of contradictions" (Jones and Coss 6) and has been understood in many different ways over time. As a result, "the study of chivalry is a debated and contested field" (6), and recent publications on the subject, such as *Knighthood and Society in the High Middle Ages*, stress "how difficult it remains

unambiguously to define terms such as knighthood and chivalry” (Crouch and Deploige 1). The essays in this volume and the recently published *Companion to Chivalry* engage with a variety of topics related to chivalry’s historical development and cultural impact. Other publications, like Megan Leitch’s “Thinking Twice about Treason in Caxton’s Prose Romances: Proper Chivalric Conduct and the English Printing Press” continue to develop our understanding of representations of chivalry in literature that both shape and reflect its real-world manifestations.

This thesis turns to Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* because they represent distinct moments in the history of English-language literature. Malory served as a knight in the Hundred Years’ War and is believed to have written much of the *Le Morte Darthur* during the 1450s and 1460s while he was imprisoned during the Wars of the Roses: “The way Malory told the history of King Arthur was well-suited to the 1450s...national events proved how much his contemporaries could profit from reflecting on the Arthurian legends” (Hardyment 345). Bradley, in contrast, wrote during the latter half of the twentieth century and published *The Mists of Avalon* in 1982. Writing in the wake of second-wave white feminism, “Her re-creation of the legend in terms acceptable to a liberal and feminist readership reflects twentieth-century culture’s increased support of female strength and power but brings up its own set of attendant anxieties” (McClain 197). Their texts therefore offer unique perspectives on the Arthurian tradition and on themes typically associated with chivalry. Each of the three chapters in this thesis explores a single character’s relationship to chivalric prowess and violence. The first chapter focuses on Balin le Sauvage as he navigates brutality and justice, two antithetical approaches to chivalric violence, in Malory’s *Morte*. The second chapter focuses on Malory’s Lancelot du Lac, whose position obliges him continually to prove his prowess in violent exchanges to sustain the worship and reputation of Arthur’s Round Table. The third chapter focuses

on the way that Bradley's *Mists* demonstrates the way that chivalry's repressive ideal forces Gwenhwyfar (Guenevere) to be dependent on male figures, limiting her to being a daughter, wife, and mother. Together, these characters and their narratives suggest that chivalry is an unstable and unhealthy means of organizing a group of peoples as violence ultimately defines their lives and identities.

What is Chivalry?

Chivalry is notoriously difficult to define. While certain aspects of it are constant, it is difficult to determine which of its qualities are essential: "Many medieval authors – and many modern scholars – have struggled to define the value systems of knights. There was no official 'code' of chivalry to which all knights agreed, but the same themes appear repeatedly" (Jestice 33). I therefore need to address two issues before providing a definition of chivalry. First, since the end of the Middle Ages, the word has taken on a number of connotations unassociated with the knightly sphere but which pertain to gentlemen or men in general: "Most people think chivalry is relatively harmless, an old-fashioned idea of politeness that just means pulling out a chair or opening a car door" (Kaufman and Sturtevant 104). But our modern notions of chivalry are "radically different" (106) from its historical reality, and common misconceptions are unfortunately used by many extremist groups to "incite violence and discrimination" (3). White supremacists, such as the Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, have for centuries used "propaganda that elevated medieval Europe, and medieval white people, in the modern imagination" (82). Chivalry is presented by these groups "as an ideology of physical protection of the weak, fighting in someone else's defense, or as service to morality and faith" (104); in reality, however, these groups

use chivalry's ideals "to police gender roles" (108) and claim that ancestry "boosted their claims to superiority" (98), "lending a rather ugly undercurrent of misogyny and racism to the use of the term by the political right" (Jones and Coss 5). Allow me to explicitly denounce these uses of Medieval history as exceedingly reprehensible: "As medievalists, we are passionate about challenging these uses of the Middle Ages whenever and wherever we find them, and equally passionate about helping people explore the real history of a diverse, rich, and complex medieval world" (Kaufman and Sturtevant 8). These modern uses of chivalry are both interesting and problematic, but ultimately they are beyond the scope of this thesis. Here, I am concerned with representations of medieval chivalry as it existed "in the period between about 1100 and about 1500" (Keen 2) of the Common Era, with Malory's text providing insight into how chivalry was understood towards the end of the medieval period, and Bradley's text presenting chivalry from the perspective of the 1980s.

The second issue in defining chivalry is its inherent ambiguity. While ambiguity has the potential to frustrate attempts to discuss chivalry in concrete terms, it also makes chivalry an interesting topic of study. Chivalry was both highly contextual and "effectively international" (Keen 37), and those who practiced it were themselves too diverse to be defined; chivalry was practiced across much of western Europe for hundreds of years, and this single word bore the heavy burden of a continent's collective cultural beliefs regarding the knightly ideal. The lack of a strict definition enabled chivalry to adapt to shifting social climates while also making it accessible to the cultures to which it spread. The chivalric code was understood in different ways at different times, allowing for a range of interpretations and empowering groups and individuals to adapt it to their own circumstances. Furthermore, the sources for understanding chivalry—from the monastic, to the historical, to the purely fictional—were all written with their own biases and

therefore need to be interpreted cautiously. The result is that the word “was used in the middle ages with different meanings and shades of meaning by different writers and in different contexts” (2). No single usage can claim authority over the others. Consequently, more precise definitions of chivalry are prone to excluding examples that belong in the realm of chivalry while broader definitions might include instances that other definitions would deem to be beyond chivalry’s purview. This is why the early-modern transition away from chivalry is often discussed in terms of “Change, rather than decline” (239): ambiguity implies the potential for change, and it is because of this ambiguity that chivalry remained a cultural force long after the decline of the knight as the elite military figure. Chivalry’s ambiguity, though frustrating, not only helps to explain its ubiquity and endurance but may also be integral to its structure.

Nevertheless, I need to define chivalry to some extent in order to establish the parameters for my analysis. My definition draws extensively from Maurice Keen’s *Chivalry* and Phyllis Jestice’s *The Medieval Knight*, two modern histories that explore the concept of the knight and the ideology associated with knighthood from an historical perspective. I also draw on Ramon Llull’s *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* and Geoffroi de Charny’s *The Book of Chivalry*, two treatises written by medieval knights that were widely read and referenced during the medieval period. Drawing on these resources, I consider chivalry to be the dominant ideology of Europe’s noble aristocracy between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Blending martial, aristocratic, and Christian elements, chivalry used honour as an abstract social currency to promote a variety of virtues intended to re-direct the individualistic energies of noble Christian knights towards the protection and just regulation of society. These virtues change in both number and focus depending on the source, but the following nine are salient: courage, loyalty, prowess, franchise, largesse, courtesy, faith, devotion, and piety. Theoretically, each of these virtues contributed equally to the

chivalric identity. In practice, however, chivalry prioritized prowess, an attribute to which the other virtues were often subordinated. Chivalry's martial facet therefore emerges as central to the ideology, with the aristocratic and Christian facets serving to guide its individualistic and violent tendencies towards communal ends, limiting its abuse. In what follows I will explain the implications and limitations of this definition, as well as its connection to literary representations. I will begin by considering the relationship between ideology and honour before considering the relationship between the three facets of chivalric identity and their relationship to its salient virtues.

Ideology and Honour

Although it was sometimes described as an order, sometimes a social class, and other times as a set of skills, chivalry is best described as an ideology. An ideology, according to Louis Althusser is, "the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a [person] or social group" (107). Ideologies are therefore "imaginary" (108) in that they only exist in the minds of individuals, but they are also powerful in that "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects...Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived" (119). From birth we are "steeped" (89) in the ideological beliefs of our communities, and, conscious of it or not, these beliefs strongly influence how we perceive the material world. More importantly, ideologies influence how we perceive ourselves in relation to the world and to other individuals, representing "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (109) as well as "the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (111). Chivalry, then, was influential not only because it defined

the knight in relation to the material and social world of High and Late medieval Europe, but because it also defined the rest of society in relation to knights. By centralizing the knight's role within society and his rank relative to other members of that society, chivalry established specific relationships between the knight and everyone else in which the knight took precedence. The behaviour these relationships encouraged reflects the principles, values, and beliefs espoused by the chivalric ideology.

Some ideologies promote the ideal government and others the ideal community, but chivalry prioritized the ideal individual, meaning that chivalry can only be understood through representations of ideal knights. This "strong streak of individualism" (Keen 250) resulted from chivalry's development within a feudal system where "its cult of individualism" could draw strength from "the fragility of government controls which threw back the nobleman so heavily upon his own resources" (253). But the knight also emerged during a time when "endemic warfare marked the culture of the period profoundly" (219), and so it was understandable that "the warrior should have stood out as a figure of peculiar significance" (219), causing the "idolisation of the aristocratic knight errant" (219). Chivalry developed around individual military figures who needed to act independently, resulting in the idealization of the singular knight errant. Descriptions of chivalry become depictions of the ideal knight whose characteristics reveal chivalry's fundamental values.

Like chivalry itself, chivalric honour was an idea that was often ambiguous. Nonetheless honour was essential to chivalry because it bound the ideology and its subjects together by providing "a nexus between the ideals of society and their reproduction in the actions of individuals" (249). Honour had different connotations in the medieval period than it developed in later periods. In the modern period, honour could be defined as one's internal sense of having acted

properly, morally, or ethically, but the first two entries in the *Middle English Dictionary* suggest that medieval conceptions of honour were more social: “The action of honoring or paying respect to someone; an act, a gesture, or a ceremony displaying reverence or esteem; worship...Fame, good repute; worldly glory; distinction” (*MED*). These two definitions present honour as something that is marked by action and validated socially. The sense that honour could be internally motivated was present in the Middle Ages, as it is today, but medieval texts suggest that honour also required public acknowledgement. This creates a division in honour’s antitheses, guilt and shame, where guilt regulates the “inner life” (Gibson 64) while shame “values the public display of loyalties” (64). Guilt bothered the knight’s conscience, but shame affected his personal and public relationships. Whereas guilt might threaten a sense of honour in contemporary literature, shame repeatedly threatens honour in chivalric literature.

Honour’s purpose was to encourage chivalric actions, for if “the ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions” (Althusser 114), then ideologies must be performed in order to be manifest. Althusser, writing on ideological subjects in general, provides an accurate description of the sort of actions a knight would perform in service to chivalry: “If he believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses...If he believes in Duty, he will have the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices...If he believes in justice, he will submit unconditionally to the rules of the Law” (113). The ideals of the Christian God, of Duty, and of Law are reinforced through actions which prioritize those ideals. Conversely, to act counter to one’s professed ideology “implies that he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims” (114). To be chivalrous, then, was to perform chivalric deeds, and failure to do so would be a problem for an ideology which demanded strict dedication.

By making honour both sociable and actionable, chivalric society created an abstract and subjective system of publicly recognizing actions which supported chivalry, thereby encouraging further displays of similar conduct. By connecting this public validation with one's internal sense of value, knights were taught to associate their personal honour with knightly duties, cementing their devotion to chivalry through conditioned emotional response. But because honour subjectively ranked individuals based on their perceived chivalric accomplishments, knights had to perform chivalric deeds publicly to receive honour. A knight's honour was consequently dependent on public displays of chivalry, committing them "to act as they should" (Keen 249). Furthermore, honour's social quality meant that one's honour could change based on the honour of those to whom one was connected. Ramon Llull, a knight who became a "peripatetic scholar, evangelist and missionary" (Fallows 1), wrote *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* as a chivalric manual in response to "the perceived failures" (2) of knighthood. His text is sensitive to honour's associative quality, and he warns chivalric society to be conscious of this as well: "the lord who multiplies honour in the knight who is his vassal multiplies his own honour" (81). Honour was therefore communal honour, and shame communal shame, powerful motivators in the highly communal world of medieval Europe. The combination of social and subjective qualities meant that honour needed to be constantly maintained through public chivalric actions, which in turn reinforced the chivalric ideology for not only the subject, but for all members of the community.

Honour is only as important as society deems it to be, and it was theoretically possible for knights to ignore their honour in favour of other, less idealistic goals. But medieval society "set a high price on worldly honour (Keen 217), considering it to be "as essential to nobility as wealth was" (247), teaching the medieval knight to "place honour at the centre of his mental and social world" (250), and demanding that he "prize honour before all" (10). Fourteenth-century knight,

Geoffroi de Charny, “was the quintessential knight of the age” (Kaeuper 3), and as “author of three works on chivalric ideas and practices, Charny could also lay claim to the title of theoretician of chivalry in fourteenth-century France” (3). His *Book of Chivalry* instructs any knight who reads it to “set one’s heart and mind on winning honor, which endures for ever” (99), and to value honour over wealth: “honor will always remain, and the worldly goods will disappear” (117). Honour superseded physical comfort: “shame must cause greater suffering to his courage than hunger, thirst, heat, cold or any other suffering or hardship to his body” (Llull 59), and its importance was greater even than life: “compared to loss of honor, death itself is a trifle” (Kaeuper 57). Honour was the greatest motivator in chivalric conduct, and a good knight was willing to suffer, die, and kill for his honour, as well as the honour of his family, his lord, and his lady.

Defining what constituted honourable behaviour is as difficult as defining chivalry: honour was an impression—a feeling—and it was expressed through examples and imagery; to quote Justice Potter Stewart in his description of what constitutes obscene content, “I know it when I see it” (Marlan 767). For the medieval knight, honourable behaviour and chivalric behaviour were nearly synonymous. This is what makes the exceptions—moments when chivalric behaviour is shameful and when honourable behaviour is unchivalric—so interesting.

It is tempting to define chivalry as a list of values, beliefs, and characteristics that medieval peoples believed were the epitome of the chivalric ideal, but chivalry was “a way of life” (Keen 17). It is therefore helpful to understand chivalry as having been comprised of three facets: the martial (feudal), the social (aristocratic), and the religious (Christian). These facets can be described as being “fused” (16) together, for while each contributed fundamentally to knightly identity, chivalry was necessarily derived from their combination: “In a given context, one facet may be to the fore, but it remains hard to exclude overtones from elsewhere” (16). The martial

facet may come to the fore more commonly than the others, but it is important to understand the influences of the other two facets in order to understand how they interact. I will now consider all three facets with reference to their origins, their qualities, and their influence on chivalry as a whole.

The Martial Facet

The martial facet was “the earliest element” (Jestice 8) in chivalry’s development, for the knight’s primary function was as “the professional fighting man” (8). The knight’s origins can be found in the cavalymen of the ninth and tenth centuries, as evinced by the word “chivalry,” which is etymologically related to the French *chevalier* (knight) and *cheval* (horse). While medieval feudal lords always “maintained some household troops” (8), who originated “from a range of social classes” (8), by the eleventh century developments in mounted tactics and technologies had turned the cavalryman into the elite warrior of the Middle Ages. Not only did this mean that “A new measure of skill and training was demanded of its practitioner” (Keen 25), but armour, weapons, and horses were expensive: a good hauberk could “cost the annual income of a prosperous village” (Jestice 100). Consequently, “to be a cavalryman began to imply substantial means or substantial patronage” (Keen 26). Knights and lords developed a “mutual need of one another” (29), where lords needed trustworthy and competent warriors as they “warred frequently with internal rebels, external invaders, and each other” (Jestice 11) and in return could offer “arms, money or land; or a hand towards a good marriage; or a measure of security in the enjoyment of their estates” (Keen 29). The English word “knight” comes from the Old English *cniht*, which, throughout the Middle Ages, had evolved in meaning from “a boy, youth, lad”, to “a boy or lad

employed as an attendant or servant”, to “a military servant or follower” (*OED*), until it eventually came to carry the full connotations of the chivalric knight. This etymology reminds us that knighthood is masculine in its origins, and that although the distinction between the knight and his lord would gradually blur, or outright disintegrate, the origins of the knight were grounded in service, and that “the emphasis on service” (Keen 236) never entirely goes away, regardless of the knight’s social rank.

If chivalry’s martial facet evolved to represent the knight as an unflinching warrior, dedicated to single lord, and dependent on proving himself in battle to achieve wealth, status, and honour, then courage, loyalty, and prowess could properly represent this facet. Courage, to begin with, is an obvious quality for a knight, who encountered “real and ugly dangers” (223), for the chivalric vocation was brutal and included “gruelling, shocking encounters that must have left psychological scars on knights” (Jestice 81). Despite these conditions, knights did confront their duties with courage, motivated through the dual combination of metaphorical carrot and stick: “Gross cowardice was notionally punishable with death; lesser cowardice could involve loss of status and insignia” (Keen 175); in contrast “those who showed themselves bold in arms might on that account be knighted in the field” (Keen 167). Courage committed the knight to his vocation, providing him with the inner strength to fight without hesitation.

Loyalty was the “second great chivalric virtue” (Kaeuper 59), for social bonds situated the knight relative to society, and devotion to these relationships imbued the chaotic arena of medieval warfare with a sense of order, ensuring that the violence inherent in the feudal system had direction and purpose. But the demands of loyalty were steep. While the chivalric code may be ambiguous on certain matters, it was a knight’s unequivocal duty to “support and defend his temporal lord” (Llull 46) “and to give his life for him if need be” (Keen 70). This is exemplified in the life of

Charny himself who died defending his king in battle, and in doing so, “unfailingly met the conditions of his oath” (Kaeuper 16). Knights invariably deferred to their lord’s authority, and disobedience, if serious enough, could even constitute treason, which was perhaps the most shameful thing a knight could do: “to betray one’s lord had from the earliest days of chivalry and before been held the darkest of all the crimes with which a knight or warrior could be charged” (Keen 175). Furthermore, honour’s associative qualities meant that honour achieved by the knight reflected on his lord, and vice versa; “this conception of associative honour is beautifully encapsulated in the words of the German ministerial poet Milo von Sevelingen: ‘*das Wurde werdens wirdet mir*’ – the worth of the worthy makes me worthy” (69). To perform well and to provide faithful service were therefore important qualities for the knight to exhibit, not only for himself but for the lord whose life he valued above his own. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that the reality was often otherwise and that chivalry’s strong ethic of loyalty probably developed in response to inconstancy and betrayal. Nonetheless, the chivalric literature under consideration represents the knight-lord relationship as absolute, and any breach of this loyalty was a crime without equal.

There was one other relationship, however, which challenged the loyalty an ideal knight owed his lord, for chivalry often “set fidelity to a beloved woman alongside fidelity to a liege lord as twin lode-stones of loyalty” (Keen 193). Chivalry demanded that knights “honour and respect all ladies” (Jestice 40) and treat them with the highest reverence, but a knight should also choose one lady in particular to love loyally, and his service to this lady “was essentially comparable to the ethic of faithful service to a lord” (Keen 30), even if she were ignorant of his existence. This was the courtly love ethic, and it taught that love “sharpens and refines the honourable ambitions of martial men” (Keen 14), and that without love a knight “cannot hope to perfect himself” (Jestice

39). While this might be dismissed as idealistic, ideas can alter reality in surprising ways. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl describes his love for his wife as his source of strength while he endured the incomparable cruelty of the German concentration camps: "In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honourable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment" (39). The contemplation of ideas can have remarkable effects on one's mental state, and the courtly love ethic taught knights to place their lady beside their lord in their ideal of loyalty, motivating them to perform greater feats of prowess in honour of their beloved.

This courtly love ethic affected the ladies as well, for chivalry imposed its own feminine ideal that restricted noble women to their "roles as family members, wives, and mothers" (Holdorph 36). In the often-misogynistic medieval world noble women were frequently treated as "marriage pawns" (9) and their "agency is difficult to detect" (37). My chapter on Gwenhwyfar considers chivalry's influence on women in detail. It focuses on the restrictive expectations placed on Gwenhwyfar from birth and the cruel emotional and mental manipulations used to shame and guilt her when she veers from her assigned path, as well as the frustrating and tedious alternatives afforded her while the men depart for adventure. For now, I will simply acknowledge that the courtly love ethic associated with chivalry treated women as objects of knightly consideration—albeit highly revered ones—but not as complex human individuals.

The most fundamental of the martial qualities, if not all chivalric qualities, was prowess. Charny, whose *Book of Chivalry* "was undoubtedly the most popular medieval vernacular manual for knights" (Kaeuper 25), has an "untiring emphasis on prowess" (32), making repeated references to the "physical strength, skill, and agility" (Charny 87) needed to perform in combat.

In fact, “the virtual identification of chivalry with knightly prowess can be documented in scores of works of chivalric literature” (Kaeuper 33), attesting to its central role in the ideal. But prowess was not just the ability to perform violent acts competently: prowess was the skill that made knights valuable to the aristocratic institution as a whole. Strength upheld the position of knights as members of the ruling class, and “honourable battlefield abilities were supposed to correspond with inward honour and gentility” (Leitch 54), thereby justifying their position of authority. Balin, whose narrative I consider in the first chapter, is praised constantly for his prowess, despite his inability to distinguish between brutality—the abuse of violence—and justice—the appropriate use of violence. Even as he leaves innocent bystanders dead behind him, his narrative celebrates him as the knight “moste of worship” (Malory 42). Lancelot, whom I consider in the second chapter, is immediately identified as the knight of most prowess and repeatedly named “the noblest knyght lvyng” (155). But Lancelot is constantly required to prove his prowess anew in order to sustain the Round Table’s reputation and discourage opposition, ironically maintaining peace through violence. These two narratives—Balin’s and Lancelot’s—reveal how central prowess is to the chivalric ideal, for despite Balin’s brutality he is still recognized as Arthur’s greatest knight, and Lancelot cannot forego his prowess lest antagonists rise to challenge Arthur’s dominance.

The Social Facet

What did it mean to be noble, and how did this affect chivalry? By the eleventh and twelfth century, knighthood “had penetrated into at least the fringes of the nobility and...became a hereditary status” (23), by the thirteenth century, German emperor Frederick Barbarossa “was using the term *milites*, which in earlier periods had meant any professional fighting man, to

describe not only members of his court but himself and his sons” (Jestice 27), and by the later middle ages, “chivalry and nobility come to be almost complementary in meaning” (Keen 151). While there were fine distinctions between nobility and knighthood, the two had become, in many ways, synonymous.

The nobility maintained “the task of government” (Charny 141), making them the principal authority of medieval Europe. This authority granted them “the legitimate use of force, in theory always practiced in the interests of defense and justice” (Kaeuper 61), and they maintained this position through “the capacity to use force to uphold legal command” (Keen 177). In theory, the nobility held their social position due to their virtue, and their physical might was merely proof of God’s favour. But virtue was only “the prime factor” (158) among several qualities considered necessary for a truly noble character. A more complete list would include “princely recognition, vocation, wealth and style of life, virtue, and descent in blood” (158). All of these could serve as proof of nobility, and the ideal knight would boast all of them. Both Lull and Charny recognize the necessity of maintaining the image of nobility, and they therefore remind knights that those of an elevated social rank must act in a way that will enhance their honour: “The more a man is of high and noble rank, the more his reputation, whether good or bad, will spread throughout the world” (Charny 137). This is a topic I take up in greater detail in my chapter on Lancelot, but knights were in many ways the exemplars of noble conduct, and public (or even rumoured) displays of corruption or cruelty could result in rebellious dissention among either the peasantry or the petty nobility.

The value of franchise insists on the knight’s right to hold his social position, while largesse and courtesy provide opportunities to diminish tension between knights and other members of the community. Franchise is a word which connotes “freedom, immunity and privilege” (Fallows 91),

described by Keen as “the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony of the combination of good birth with virtue” (Keen 2). Franchise was the knight’s belief in his both his social position and his right to bear the title, privileges, and responsibilities of this position. Franchise also offered a way of reconciling God’s omniscience with the human desire for personal agency. Franchise was an assertion that the knight’s deeds were the result of the knight’s own free-will. This perspective gave the knight’s actions meaning by emphasizing the “free choice of virtue as the essential quality of the noble soul” (157). In this way, the knight’s virtues and honour, while certainly deriving from God, were also their own. Courtesy and largesse were qualities which developed to help knights and nobles maintain healthy relationships. Courtesy was “manners fitting to a court” (Keen 21), while largesse, “a quality to be expected of every nobleman” (155), is the generous quality of the chivalric spirit: “The knight must be courageous in liberality; give to rich and poor alike; spend without care for landed wealth; give what is promised; give promptly; give liberally; give fine feasts” (Kaeuper 23). These two qualities encouraged cooperation between the knight and his greater community, teaching knights to “be humble among their friends...tender and merciful toward those who need assistance...pleasant and amiable with all others” (Charny 129). In sharing their wealth liberally and in treating others with respect, even treating “enemy knights with mercy and courtesy” (Jestice 61), knights could “avoid quarrels” (Charny 129) and maintain a healthy governance over their communities.

The Religious Facet

The martial and social facets of chivalry are primarily secular, but there is no denying that chivalry was also influenced by medieval Christianity. According to Keen, “Chivalry essentially

was the secular code of honour of a martially oriented aristocracy. Its deepest roots stretched back to an origin in the social code of honour of the warrior groups of the early middle ages; it owed its strong Christian tone to the fact that those groups had operated within the setting of a Christian society” (252). This thesis is mainly focused on chivalry’s secular ideals, but chivalry’s religious strand was “inextricably interwoven” (44) with the other two, and the Christian ethos “coloured the whole presentation of knighthood” (44). Because of this, it is important to consider the religious facet in order to understand how medieval Christianity pervaded the entire chivalric institution and to see how the martial and social facets were marked by its influence.

Chivalry was always Christian, but by the middle of the eleventh century a “specifically chivalric piety was developing...based on an active, martial life, with no qualms about the pursuit of military glory” (Jestice 49). This knightly piety—called *Ritterfrömmigkeit* by the German historian Waas (Keen 51)—developed in response to the natural tension between “the pacific and the militant strands in the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Keen 45). With chivalry’s growing strength and influence, church authorities in both the papacy and monasteries recognized “their dependence on the ‘order’ of warriors for physical security” (46), but they also wanted a measure of control over the “regulation and limitation of martial activity” (47). One result of this desire for control was the crusades, which “played a massive role in shaping the Christian side of chivalry” (Jestice 52), and which, for a time, made the crusader “the perfect incarnation of chivalry” (49). While he acknowledges that the crusades influenced chivalry, Keen argues that this influence “may, in some respects, have been overstated” (45). Instead, he credits “the effective teaching of the priesthood” (51) for the strength of chivalry’s religious facet, arguing that the chivalric brand of piety “was ultimately the fruit of the ancient marriage of Teutonic heroic values with the militant tradition of the Old Testament” (63). In short, the potential for *Ritterfrömmigkeit* was inherent in the social

conditions in which chivalry developed, with the crusades serving “to thicken the Christian veneer with which the old heroic values (and the new courtly ones too) were already deeply encrusted” (57). What resulted was a knightly piety that offered “honour in this world and salvation in the next” (55), successfully fusing the secular and religious values of the chivalric ideal.

Chivalry’s religious facet expressed itself through faith, devotion, and piety, which applied to all aspects of knightly life. The knight occupied “the warrior order of the familiar tripartite division of society (the men, that is to say, whose business is to uphold justice with the sword)” (Keen 152). The other two orders are traditionally identified as the priesthood (those who pray) and the peasantry (those who work). It was the warrior order’s vocation to govern, defend, and enact justice, and chivalry’s religious facet was concerned specifically with the knight’s responsibility “to uphold and defend the Holy Catholic Faith” (Llull 44) and to maintain order in Christendom. The knight exemplifies faith through his belief that these duties “can well be performed according to God’s will” (Charny 183), through his reliance on “true and certain hope that comes from God that He will help [him]” (131), and through his recognition that “[he] on [his] own can achieve nothing except what God grants [him]” (133). He exemplifies devotion through regular worship, “he must fast on Fridays; he must hear mass every day” (Kaeuper 24), and through the dedicated practice of his vocation: “a knight without office...is the same as faith without work, and he is the same as miscreance, which is against faith” (Llull 47). Lastly, the ideal knight exemplifies piety through the reverent pursuit of his duties, not just their consistent pursuit: “he who neither loves nor fears God is not worthy of joining the Order of Chivalry” (Llull 56). Naturally, *Ritterfrömmigkeit* required the knight to be a good Christian in the usual sense that he avoid sin and follow the teachings of the church, and it demanded that he extend these teachings to his martial and social duties as well.

There were knights who took their Christian duties more seriously, sacrificing many of their martial and social responsibilities in favour of religious ones. Since this thesis is concerned primarily with chivalry's secular social issues, I will end my examination of the religious facet here. What is important is that *Ritterfrömmigkeit* applied to all spheres of chivalric life, and that a knight was not only pious in religious matters, but believed that "a knightly life, with all its violence and with all the richness and decor of its aristocratic trappings, is within its own terms a road to salvation" (Keen 62). Even though "religious priorities were very often not the driving force behind its ethic" (252), "to serve the king and to serve God were usually the same thing" (251). This is the nature of the fusion of chivalry's three facets: the social and martial characteristics of the ideal knight were often not explicitly religious in nature, but they were *always* religious in their foundations, and the faith, devotion, and piety which underpin *Ritterfrömmigkeit* provided the chivalric knight with the spiritual and moral strength to achieve glory and honour in the eyes of their peers and in the eyes of their God as well.

Literary Representations of Chivalry

While my account so far may suggest that chivalry was a fairly coherent ideology, it was also highly exclusive, overly dependent on the virtue of its practitioners, and often created unrealistic expectations. Chivalry was an exclusive ideal, and when discussing representations of medieval chivalric characters, this almost always means *male nobility*. Women and peasants were almost always represented as stereotypes and caricatures, and they were almost always excluded from participating in chivalric activity. But because "representation is less about truth than belief" (Blanchard 178), these representations always had and have the potential to reduce actual people

to stereotypes and caricatures in the minds of those reading the literature, reinforcing the belief that they were unfit for chivalric society. Chivalry was therefore an ideology which privileged a small subset of its subjects—male nobility—while it subordinated the rest of society, most of whom were nonetheless compelled to live by many of its ideals, and the literature reinforced this social structure. The chivalric ideal was also “very difficult and very expensive” (Jestice 33), and it challenged those who practiced it: “many – perhaps even most – knights did not fully live up to the values of chivalry” (33). The reality was that knights were human, and were therefore flawed, and many of them abused their authority and the independence of their position: “It was one thing to encourage individualistic errantry; it was another business, and potentially a very difficult one, to control it” (Keen 227). Because ideas manifest in action, the shameful actions of supposedly chivalric knights created within chivalry a “distorted image of itself” (234), and “the idealistic chivalrous ethic, with its emphasis on the honour to be acquired by individual adventuring and on the nobility of the profession of arms, clearly itself contributed directly to the problem” (230). I hope to show throughout this thesis that even idealized chivalry was problematic, and the problems associated with chivalry as portrayed in the literature are not simply side-effects but present in its very foundations.

Chivalry may seem to be an unrealistic ideology, but that may be because it was also shaped and expressed through the unrealistic realm of romantic literature. My definition of chivalry is based to some extent on historical sources and accounts. My thesis considers chivalry as it manifests in fiction, where the complex implications of the ideology can be demonstrated and where ideal characters can serve as examples of chivalric behaviour and its consequences, however un-ideal those might be. Ultimately, chivalry was defined by the “ideal depiction” (Keen 224) of the perfect knight, as opposed to an articulate description, and medieval knights measured

themselves against these depictions more than they contemplated any list of abstract values. In this way, chivalric romances “(re)imagine and seek to regulate their society” (Leitch 42). My definition of chivalry attempts to articulate an ideal in order to analyze its expression in literary texts. This thesis focuses on the actions of characters governed by chivalric ideology in Arthurian fiction because they reveal the various forms that authors have considered the chivalric ideal to take. The variety of figures I consider, both heroic and villainous, are meant to serve as examples of good and bad chivalric behaviour. I will therefore ignore the impulse, however genuine, to dismiss chivalry as unrealistic. For even if chivalry created unrealistic expectations, it was still “the properly dominant force within the world” (Kaeuper 48), and “there was hardly a knight whose life was not shaped by chivalric expectations” (Jestice 33). However high-minded and however foreign to twenty-first century sensibilities it may be, chivalry was taken seriously as an ideology in the Middle Ages, and its literature was no less effective at defining its ideals than the flesh-and-blood knights who lived by them.

Chapter 1:

Balin, Brutality, and Justice

“The Tale of Balyn and Balan” in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* presents Balin le Sauvage as “the seminal quest knight...an antetype for Lancelot and Galahad” (Tiller 48), and his narrative demonstrates chivalry’s transition away from the brutal ideals of Uther’s era towards the just ideals that Arthur’s court comes to embody. Balin is unable to distinguish between two opposing manifestations of chivalric violence, brutality and justice. Nonetheless, he also recognizes and regrets when his violence causes unnecessary harm. Balin’s failure to act according to the new ideals associated with Arthur indicates his commitment to the conception of chivalry that dominated Uther’s reign, yet his ability to discern his faults signals the need to transition towards a different conception of chivalry. Balin’s tale reveals that the chivalric ideology creates a catch-22 for knights: to refuse to enact violence expected of him would be shameful, but he can nonetheless be held responsible for the consequences of his violent actions—whether he intends those outcomes or construes them as part of his destiny. Through Balin, Malory demonstrates the destructive potential of elevating prowess and violence to the pinnacle of the chivalric ideal, of allowing strength to dictate ethical standards as opposed to being directed towards the protection of good ethical standards. Balin’s tale draws attention to the two modes of violence by not only creating a double for Balin in the form of his brother, Balan, but also identifying Balin as the Knight with the Two Swords, where each sword symbolizes a different mode of violence that Balin performs.

Through Balin and his Tale, Malory portrays the shift away from the chivalry of Arthur’s father, Uther, towards the chivalry that is eventually embodied in Arthur’s greatest knight, Lancelot. This shift is represented through Balin’s violence and its consequences. Balin’s violence

is predicated on the chivalric ideal of Utherian Britain, for he is both a “product and participant of this violent milieu” (Tiller 49). Fighting under Arthur, Balin becomes a “frustrated” (Jesmok 27) hero, for the values of his new lord are incongruous with the values he has previously held, and so “the reader is never sure how much sympathy and trust to give to this strange character. He is curiously obstinate and rash, and his frequent errors of judgement make him seem like a bungler, but also he is so often exceedingly noble and genuinely upset when his good intentions lead to disastrous outcomes” (Norris 54). Balin’s reactions to the negative consequences of his action suggest that he feels responsible for the harm he causes even if he felt his actions were justified in the moment. His attempt to uphold Utherian chivalry, even as chivalry seems to be undergoing a great change, make Balin’s moral standing ambiguous. Readers seeking to understand Balin’s actions and their consequences are offered some help through the memorialization of his violent deeds and victims on inscriptions written on tombs. These tombs “assume the task of writing history, specifically, a history of the evolution of chivalry” (Tiller 41), providing “a context for interpreting violent action” (41). The inscriptions remind not only the denizens of Arthur’s kingdom but also the reader of Malory’s text that chivalry’s victims are worth remembering, too. Balin and his tale represent a transition away from the ideals of Utherian Britain to those of Arthurian chivalry, and Balin’s actions, their consequences, and Malory’s presentation of them provide a means of understanding the disjunction between the ideals of violence with which Balin was familiar and those that will come to be associated with Arthur’s court.

The Utherian conception of chivalry sets prowess as its defining quality. According to this form of chivalry, strength dictates the ethical and cultural standards of the kingdom. This aspect of Utherian chivalry is shown when kings Ban and Bors praise the eleven kings that have banded against Arthur: “blame hem nat, for they do as good men ought to do...they ar the beste fyghtynge

men and knyghtes of moste prouesse that ever Y saw other herde off speke” (Malory 25). These kings have refused to accept the range of evidence offered for Arthur’s legitimacy, yet their strength and courage are presented as proof of their honour, suggesting they should be respected for standing up to Arthur instead of condemned for their eager willingness to engage in war. When Arthur first encounters King Pellinore, he questions his adversary’s custom of refusing to let knights pass unless they should joust with him. Pellinore answers, “Thys custom [...] have I used and woll use magré who seyth nay. And who that ys agreved with my custum lette hym amende hit” (35). Pellinore challenges Arthur to defeat him if he wishes to change Pellinore’s ways. According to this ideology, norms are decided by the strong, and only a show of strength can change the norms.

The idea that strength decides moral rightness is a foundational aspect of chivalric literature, for prowess and success in battle were, theoretically, proof that God had honoured the victorious with the right to enact violence on His behalf. Charny reminds his readers that they owe their success to God’s will: “you on your own can achieve nothing except what God grants you...He allows you of His mercy to defeat your enemies without harm to yourself” (133). This notion came from the medieval belief regarding the origins of chivalry, which taught that after the Biblical Fall of Man chaos and disorder reigned, and so “chivalry was instituted to restrain and defend the people” (Keen 9). One man in every thousand—“more kind, wise, loyal and strong, and with nobler courage” (Llull 40)—was chosen to be made knight and “lords of the people” (41). These original knights were tasked with governing and enforcing justice and were considered to be ancestors to the noble aristocracy (Charny 139).

According to Llull, whose thirteenth century *Book of the Order of Chivalry* is “at the core of our understanding of medieval knighthood” (Fallows 1), the knightly class maintained justice

and order primarily through fear. Lull insists that the exhibition of knightly prowess could serve as a powerful way of keeping others in line: “knights, by upholding the Order of Chivalry through nobility of courage and force of arms...incline the people to fear and they will in turn be afraid of committing offences” (Lull 42). Lull repeatedly argues that fear is a legitimate way of reinstating legal order. In one passage he approves of a case when “justice sought to recover its honour by means of fear” (40); in another he anticipates a similar outcome: “through fear, truth and justice shall be restored” (41). Ultimately, he believes that fear of knightly violence deters people from taking action against not only knights but also each other: “out of the dread that the people have of the knights they hesitate to destroy lands, and out of fear of the knights, kings and princes hesitate to proceed against each other” (47). Thus Lull presents fear as an essential element in the chivalric institution, discouraging crime and disorder through fear of violent knightly justice.

The societal order maintained through this fear was not only order *within* the feudal system, but the very order *of* the feudal system, making chivalric violence and its suppression of dissension an essential part of medieval Europe’s social structure. We can see this expressed humorously by the peasant in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: “Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help, help! I’m being repressed!” (11:48). Dennis the peasant rightly points out that the threat of knightly violence towards the lower classes was not just incidental—the result of a bad apple or unfortunate encounter—but part of the asymmetrical distribution of access to the technologies of violence designed to maintain the social hierarchy. While this may be generally true of chivalric violence, Malory seems to insist this approach to violence describes an earlier time. He seems to suggest that Utherian chivalry is an ideology that establishes and maintains the powerful through violence rather than one that uses violence to defend the position of the just. T.H. White brings this issue into focus in *The Once and Future King*, where a young Arthur struggles

with the idea that “Might is Right” (248) before adopting the view that “Might is only to be used for Right” (275). Malory uses Balin’s tale to represent the transition away from a conception of chivalry in which strength is the measure of moral and ethical standards towards a chivalry where strength is used to uphold moral and ethical standards derived from more equitable sources like democratic consensus.

Balin performs and represents the two modes of violence that are introduced in the opening sequence of his tale. The beginning recounts that King Royns has raised an army and “entred in the londe and brente and slew the Kyngies trew lyege people” (Malory 40). Arthur responds that “hit were grete shame unto myne astate but that he were myghtly withstonde” (40). Whereas Royns is characterized as an attacking king, Arthur seeks to defend his position. The encounter between these kings juxtaposes offensive violence intended to harm—brutality—with defensive violence intended to protect—*justice*. Brutality can also be understood as the irresponsible use of sanctioned violence while justice represents its appropriate use.

Balin’s tale also reminds readers that it can be difficult to distinguish between brutality and justice, that strength does not guarantee the capacity to decide upon the appropriate use of violence, and that Balin will struggle to navigate his violent responsibilities. Once Arthur has gathered his court in preparation to march against Royns, a damsel arrives with a sword, declaring that no knight may pull it from its sheath unless he is “a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory, and without treson” (Malory 40). She then says that she has already been to Royns, but that none of his knights were worthy of the sword, suggesting that should one of Arthur’s knights achieve this challenge his court, and therefore his brand of chivalry, is the better of the two. After Arthur and his entire court fail to achieve the sword, Balin, recently released from the dungeons, presents himself. At first the damsel refuses him for his appearance,

but Balin insists that “manhode and worship ys hyd within a mannes person...nat in araymente” (42), and so the damsel allows him to try and he “easyly” (42) draws the sword from the sheath.

Strength alone is an inadequate measure of chivalric quality, and honourable qualities can be difficult to discern. Malory is explicit that it requires more than strength to draw the damsel’s sword. When Arthur attempts to pull the sword, the damsel tells him “ye nede nat for to pulle halffe so sore, for he that shall pulle hit oute shall do hit with litill myght” (Malory 41), and then Balin pulls it out “easyly”, causing the damsel to call Balin “a passynge good knyght and the beste that ever Y founde, and moste of worship” (42). Balin pulls the sword from its sheath by virtue of his character as opposed to his physical strength. The damsel acknowledges him as the knight of most worship for this act. Thus the tale indicates a shift away from strength as the sole measure of chivalric quality. Yet the damsel’s initial refusal to accept Balin based on his appearance reminds readers that discerning chivalric quality is difficult. Earlier in the text, Arthur twice comes across strangers whom he treats discourteously based on their appearance (28, 31); in both instances the strangers are revealed to be Merlin. In the first instance Arthur is embarrassed for his ignorance, while in the second Merlin chides him for his discourtesy: “the chylde tolde you trouthe, and more he wolde a tolde you and ye wolde a suffirde hym” (32). These short anecdotes reveal Merlin’s efforts to influence Arthur away from superficial judgments of character, and Balin’s insistence that honour is an interior quality as opposed to an external one continues this development. Things often are not as simple as they appear, and the ability to judge situations beyond their surface presentation is important. Brutality and justice are not always plain, and sometimes one may masquerade as the other.

This moment also provides insight into the sword’s symbolism while foreshadowing Balin’s inability to minimize his brutality. When Balin achieves the damsel's sword, she asks him

to return it to the scabbard, warning that if he keeps the sword, “ye shall sle with that swerde the beste frende that ye have, and the man that ye moste love in the worlde—and that swerde shall be youre destruccion” (42). The damsel’s words establish a parallel between Balin’s achieving of this sword and Arthur’s reception of Excalibur. When Arthur is given Excalibur, Merlin asks him whether he prefers the sword or the scabbard. Arthur replies, “the swerde” (38). Merlin tells him, “Ye are the more unwyse, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded” (38). The scene in Balin’s tale fulfills the earlier one: whereas Merlin highlights the scabbard’s ability to preserve life, the damsel emphasizes the sword’s ability to destroy. The sword and scabbard have traditionally symbolized other binaries—war and peace, masculinity and femininity—the sword and scabbard in this tale symbolize brutality and justice. The scabbard’s purpose, after all, is to protect the wearer and their companions from the sharp edge of the sword, implying that justice protects the knight from his own brutality. A scabbard’s presence implies the presence of a sword, and thus the potential for violence—a potential which is meant to discourage criminals and other offenders from acting and thereby to make the use of the sword unnecessary. The damsel’s sword consequently represents both the right to enact violence and the burden of using that violence responsibly. Balin, however, refuses to return the sword to its scabbard, hinting at his potential for brutality.

Balin’s refusal also makes him responsible for the sword’s ethical use. Balin says when he keeps the sword, “I shall take the aventure...that God woll ordayne for me” (42). Recognizing that he was the only knight able to pull the sword from its scabbard, Balin may feel entitled to challenge to the damsel’s prophecy. At this moment of his triumph, “he is too self-confident to believe anything so terrible as the destiny revealed by the damsel could befall him” (Kelly 90). In keeping

the sword, Balin makes the choice to take the right of violence and the burden of using it responsibly upon himself. This reinforces the notion that Balin's violence is a choice. His brutality is therefore not a result of destiny, but a consequence of his ideology, suggesting that his ideals of violence have been constructed in response to some societal need that may or may not persist.

The two sets of doubles in Balin's tale both invoke brutality and justice. According to Fowler, "Balin himself finds his double in his brother Balan. Likewise, he is the Knight with the Two Swords, a point stressed throughout the story" (70). Balin and Balan represent two possible versions of the chivalric knight, and Balin's two swords represent the two forms of violence he is capable of enacting: violence meant to harm and violence meant to protect. This symbolism links Balin to the brutality and justice introduced at the beginning of the tale, clarifying their thematic purpose as representations of chivalric violence. Balin and Balan's roles are further defined in their fight against Lot's army where they are described as being "sente frome hevyn as angels—other devilles frome helle" (Malory 50). If we read Balan as Balin's other half, then "Balin-Balan has within himself both an angelic and a demonic power. He can be a force for good or evil in the world" (Fowler 70). Balin is therefore a character of two halves—an angelic and a demonic—and as both of these comparisons are raised during battle, both of these halves are linked to his prowess and capacity for violence. When combined with his epithet—The Knight of the Two Swords—and linked to the swords' potential for brutality and justice, Balin's demonic and angelic halves come to correspond to his capacity for brutal and just violence. Balin's character is situated between an angelic and demonic incarnation of the chivalric ideal, suggesting that his capacity for brutality is equal to his capacity for justice. By externalizing this binary through Balan, Balin's self-destruction becomes tangible and explicit. Balin's tale acknowledges that the violence he enacts has a double-edged potential: he potentially puts others and himself in danger each time he engages

in a violent act whether he is motivated by brutality or justice. Yet Balin's tale also seems to suggest that the chivalry in Arthur's time has the potential to mitigate the harms of brutality by emphasizing the importance of justice, an ideological shift that Balin both resists and represents.

The first major use of violence in Balin's tale comes shortly after he receives the sword, and Balin's conduct during this encounter quickly destabilizes his position as Arthur's champion, creating ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the chivalric code. After Balin receives the sword, the same Lady of the Lake who had given Arthur Excalibur appears and asks of Arthur the gift he had promised when he received the sword. The gift she asks for is Balin's head and the damsel's, for they were responsible for the death of her brother and father. Balin, however, recognizes the Lady for having caused the death of his mother and without hesitation "lightly smote of hyr hede before Kynge Arthure" (43). Arthur is appalled: "Ye have shamed me and all my courte, for thys lady was a lady that I was much beholdynge to, and hyder she com undir my sauffconduyghte [safe-conduct]" (43). Arthur banishes Balin from his court. Moments earlier, Balin was named the greatest knight in Arthur's court. Now, his actions demonstrate "a clear breach of the chivalric code" (Norris 54). Balin's actions are a clear betrayal of the trust that "underpins the fabric of chivalric society" (25), for the Lady had "trusted in Arthur's promise and his protection, but her trust is gravely betrayed when Balin, just out of prison for killing Arthur's cousin, beheads her...This scenario leaves the reader reeling" (26). This reaction can be explained in part by the fact that it seems unclear what the basis for judgment is at this point: "Balin's ambiguous character and actions create narrative and thematic uncertainty" (Jesmok 25). Although he has been identified as the worthiest knight, he nonetheless betrays the Lady's trust as well as Arthur's, inviting readers to question his decision-making for the remainder of the narrative. The trust which underpins the chivalric system is essential to distinguishing between brutality and justice; if all

knights were to act as recklessly as Balin in this moment, then all violence, regardless of the circumstances, could be framed as pre-emptive justice, for one could claim to be anticipating another knight's attack. If Balin represents the binary relationship between brutality and justice, as I argue he does, then this incident demonstrates a clear example of how even the most noble knights can enact brutality. Although there might be a situation in which Balin's execution of the Lady of the Lake might be considered to be justice (she did kill his mother, after all), the context in which he performs this violence makes it seem like brutality. That context is the trust placed in him to honour his obligations to Arthur. When Balin performs violence that he deems to be just but that does not acknowledge his obligations to Arthur, the "simple good-versus-bad mentality that preceded Balin's tale begins to unravel" (26). His actions not only subvert the reader's expectations for Balin but also undermine claims that chivalric violence is ethical.

The next instance of chivalric violence committed by Balin adds to this uncertainty. While it is difficult to defend his killing of the Lady of the Lake, his encounter with Lancelot seems slightly more, though perhaps not entirely, defensible. In this exchange, Balin is responsible for violence that may be technically justified as the enactment of justice but that is interpreted as brutality. Lancelot chases after Balin to challenge him to a duel. Balin accepts, but Lancelot is no match for him. When they joust, Balin kills Lancelot instantly: "Balyne smote hym [in return] thorow the shyld—and the hawbirk perysshed—and so bore hym thorow the body and over the horse crowpen; and anone turned his horse fersely and drew oute hys swerde, and wyst nat that he had slayne hym" (Malory 45). At this point, Lancelot's lover, Columbe, appears weeping, and the situation deteriorates very quickly:

And whan she aspyed that Launceor was slayne, she made sorow oute of mesure, and seyde, 'A, Balyne! two bodyes thou haste slayne in one herte, and two hertes in one body,

and two soules thou hast loste.’ And therewith she toke the swerde frome hir love that lay dede, and felle to the grounde in a swowghe.

And whan she arose, she made grete dole oute of mesure, which sorow greved Balyn passyngly sore. And he wente unto hir for to have tane the swerde oute of hir honde; but she helde hit so faste he myght nat take hit out of hir honde but yf he sholde have hurt hir—and suddeynly she sette the pomell on the grounde, and rove hirselff thorowoute the body. (Malory 46)

After Columbe slays herself, King Mark arrives, finds the dead lovers, and erects a tomb in their honour. The inscription on the tomb reads, “Here lyeth Launceor, the kyngis son of Irelonge, that at hys owne rekeyste was slayne by the hondis of Balyne...This lady Columbe, and paramour to hym, slew hirself with hys swerde, for dole and sorow” (47). The phrase that specifies that Lanceor sought out Balin “at hys owne rekeyste”, might suggest Balin is free “from any charge of wrongdoing” (Tiller 41). Nonetheless, when Merlin arrives he rebukes Balin for not saving Columbe, holding him responsible for her violent death. Merlin not only seems to concur with Columbe’s claim that by slaying Lanceor, Balin slew her as well, but he also suggests Balin should and could have saved her from herself. He tells Balin, “thou myghtyst have saved hir and thou haddist wold” (48). Balin defends himself, insisting he had no chance to stop her, but the episode as a whole reveals that his concern is not with saving lives, but with taking them: securing Columbe’s safety did not occur to him until after it was too late. Superficially, the tomb relieves Balin of guilt, but Merlin’s remarks reveal that the victims of chivalric violence are not only those who experience it directly; I will consider the indirect victimizing of noble women in particular in the third chapter. This episode therefore adds to the uncertainty regarding chivalric conduct by

demonstrating an instance of violence that may seem like justice according to the letter of the chivalric code but which results in brutality.

Later in Balin's narrative, Malory seems to suggest a certain degree of brutal violence is necessary under certain circumstances, suggesting that the Utherian conception of chivalry exists for a reason. In Arthur's battles against Nero and Lot, Balin and his brother Balan are undoubtedly heroes: "Kynge Arthure seyde hymself they were the doughtyeste knyghtes that ever he sawe, for they gaff such strokes that all men had wondir of hem" (Malory 50). Malory even gives them explicit credit for these victories: "Arthurs knyghtes, with the helpe of the Knyght with Two Swerdys and hys brothir Balan, put Kynge Lotte and hys oste to the warre [defeated Lot's army]" (51). These battles secured Arthur's reign over Britain, as enunciated by the tomb Arthur erects afterwards:

Kynge Arthure lette make the tombe of Kynge Lotte passynge rychely, and made hys tombe by hymself. And than Arthure lette make twelve images of laton and cooper and overgylte with golde, in the sygne of the twelve kynges...And Kynge Arthure was made in the sygne of a fygure stondynge aboven them with a swerde drawyn in hys honde; and all the twelve fygures had countenaunce lyke unto men that were overcom. (53)

Without question, Tiller writes, "the monument stands for his sovereignty over all of England. After this point, there are no further opponents of kingly status left to challenge Arthur" (45). Having conquered Britain politically and making himself the kingdom's central authority, Arthur can now work towards making his chivalry the dominant ideological force. Arthurian chivalry can supplant the Utherian ideals that had previously dominated the island, greatly reducing the resistance to Arthur's ideological changes:

Central authority is crucial to Malory's conception of chivalry; it complements chivalry as a means of maintaining political stability and of providing individual knights the opportunity to prove and advance themselves...the appearance of this monument marks Malory's shift of focus from Arthur's succession struggles to the actions of the individual knights. (45)

Balin's ability to overcome Arthur's enemies in battle therefore plays a critical role in asserting his king's dominance over England and in allowing chivalry to develop past the "Might is Right" brutality of the Utherian era. Arthur himself acknowledges his debt to Balin immediately following the building of the tomb, saying "for much am I beholdyng unto hym. Wolde God he wolde abyde with me!" (52). Merlin chooses this moment to remind Arthur of his priorities: "loke ye kepe well the scawberd of Excaleber, for ye shall lose no bloode whyle ye have the scawberd upon you, though ye have as many woundis upon you as ye may have" (52). The knight with the two swords may have helped to secure Arthur a kingdom, but Arthur must remember to choose the scabbard over the sword—justice over brutality.

Balin is an ambiguous figure: his prowess in battle and his ability to draw the sword in Arthur's court presents him as a chivalric ideal, yet he is also responsible for the death of the Lady of the Lake, Lanceor, and Columbe. His brutality is clearly a problem, yet it has also brought Arthur the control he needs to alter the culture of chivalry that currently exists in Britain. I don't think Malory is suggesting the ends justify the means here. I do think he is being realistic about the role of violence in this society. Before Lot goes to war with Arthur, Malory writes, "lothe was Merlion that ony of them bothe sholde be slayne, but of the tweyne he had levir Kyng Lotte of Orkeney had be slayne than Arthure" (50). Merlin, the wisest character in Britain, himself wishes that Lot and Arthur could co-exist, but he understands that Lot and Arthur cannot co-exist, nor can

their conceptions of chivalry. Brutality may be appropriate as a response to brutality. Having drawn the sword and refused the scabbard, Balin chooses brutality, but he seems to acknowledge the limitations of brutality and to acknowledge the need for justice. It is not always clear how readers are to judge his character, for “Balin is well-intentioned and courageous...also characteristically proud, rash, and vengeful” (Kelly 95). Yet it is also clear that in comparison to those whom Arthur must overcome to establish his reign, “Balin is a deeper, more sympathetic character” (Norris 56). The tombs that appear in his wake provide a means of understanding his violence and distinguishing whether brutality, justice, or some combination of both has been enacted. Tombs typically mark liminal spaces (e.g., the space between this world and the next). Here, they also mark the liminal space between Utherian chivalry and Arthurian chivalry, “a step in the development Arthurian knighthood” (Tiller 44). Balin’s brutal mode of violence is presented as if it is directly responsible for the developments that allow the chivalry associated with Lancelot to flourish. Due to this, brutality cannot be said to be entirely bad, but *mostly* bad, and the difference between these two statements is enormous.

Balin’s beheading of the Lady of the Lake, his slaying of Lancelot and Columbe’s subsequent death, and his battles against Nero and Lot present chivalric violence as ambiguous and problematic. In the first case, Balin’s brutality is presented as understandable but shameful, causing the reader to question whether knights can be trusted not to act violently. In the second case, Balin’s brutality allows him to overcome his adversary but prevents him from acting in a way that will preserve life. In the final instance, brutality is an evil that allows Arthur’s conception of chivalry to emerge in place of Utherian chivalry, suggesting that there is still a place for brutality in chivalric society. Together, these three instances complicate our understanding of chivalry by

destabilizing the central quality of prowess which binds the ideological and political systems of chivalry together.

Malory seems to insist that that the problems associated with chivalric violence are the result of characters and their choices, which ultimately invites readers to ask how ideology might influence those choices. Balin's destiny, as opposed to being pre-determined, "is worked out through an extended sequence of causally related events" (Kelly 92). Balin's choices are heavily influenced by his ideology, meaning that chivalry itself must share accountability for the collateral damage of Balin's chivalric violence. But Balin's Utherian ideals are of the residual ideology: "effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process" (Williams 122). Arthur is effectively phasing out certain residual values, for their function no longer pertains to his realm; Balin's brutality may have been useful in the past, but not anymore. The tension in Balin's tale results from this shift. This explains the tale's ambiguous portrayal of Balin's character: readers may consider him to be culpable for his actions, but forgivable for his intent. Balin's actions reveal that actions can be explained through the interaction between individuals and ideology. Balin is guided by his conception of chivalry, and the fact that his actions lead to self-destructive and outwardly calamitous consequences creates a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Malory presents choice as essential to chivalry, for the values of chivalry can only be expressed and changed through the actions that knights undertake. This issue is introduced early in the story when Balin refuses to return the enchanted sword to the damsel's scabbard and says, "I shall take the aventure...that God woll ordayne for me" (42). This reference to God within the context of Balin's decision associates his choice with the belief that God has a plan for every individual and knows the complex interweaving of his decisions. These two seemingly contradictory aspects of Balin's dialogue, his personal choice and his reference to an omniscient

creator, “highlights Malory’s emphasis, not on the ethics of knighthood, but on the more philosophical problem of destiny, in particular on the role that choice plays in shaping one’s destiny” (Kelly 90). The *Morte* seems to ask whether it is God’s plan that shapes the fates of the characters, or whether it is the decisions and actions of individual and collective knights.

This question returns me to the medieval belief that God grants strength to those whom he has chosen to lead. If it is not a pre-determined destiny but individual choices that direct the course of events, then it might equally be human decisions that shape our notions of ethics as opposed to God’s support of powerful figures. In this way, the ethics of knighthood, while not emphasized, still exist within the philosophical problem of destiny because ethics and ideals become a human construct, interpretable and changeable. For that reason, Balin’s decisions not only express the chivalry he embodies, but they shape it for others who witness his actions, either by reinforcing or challenging it. At the same time, Balin’s choices are heavily influenced by his pre-existing ideals. According to his conception of chivalry, to refuse the challenge the sword represents would be cowardly and shameful. His choice to keep the sword—to accept brutality—becomes essential because it is what allows him to bring about the conditions in which he can put it back in the scabbard and institute justice.

Balin’s actions are not isolated, for ideology affects the decisions of all the characters in the narrative, and so chivalry supports entire webs of causation that connect the actions of separate characters. Merlin demonstrates this when he correctly predicts the Dolorous Stroke after the death of Lancelot and Colombe. He tells Balin, “thou haste done thyselff grete hurte that thou saved nat thys lady that slew herselff” (Malory 48). Balin responds by refusing to accept responsibility for his failure: “I myght nat save hir, for she slewe hirsselff suddeynly” (48). Thus Balin indicates to Merlin and the reader that he will not learn from this experience. It is at this point that Merlin

foretells the Dolorous Stroke: “Because of the dethe of that lady, thou shalt stryke a stroke moste dolerous that ever man stroke” (48). Superficially, this can be read as magical prophecy. However, the sequence suggests Merlin’s prophecy is based at least in part on his insight into Balin’s character. Kelly informs us that in this episode’s “probable source, the *Suite du Merlin*” (86), “Merlin speaks of the Stroke prophetically, contrasting the slowness with which Balin had acted in attempting to prevent the suicide with the swiftness with which he would strike the Grail King” (94). In Malory’s version, Merlin says nothing of this sort, giving the statement a mystical tone. I concur with Kelly that Malory’s version makes “the causation for the Stroke more complicated.... Malory extends the causation backward through the death of Columb , to the death of Launceor, and ultimately to the opening events of the tale” (94). The Dolorous Stroke is therefore linked to all whose actions have contributed to the eventual striking: “The Lady of the Lake is blameworthy for continuing the blood feud...Launceor is culpable for his pride, envy, and vengefulness. Even Arthur is implicated indirectly.... Given the communal guilt for Columb ’s death, the Blighted Land is a fitting punishment” (94). Merlin is not prophetic, but he understands Balin and he understands chivalry, so he can predict what Balin will do and how others will react to him. Balin’s choices therefore spread past his immediate circle as his actions incite predictable responses from other characters who in turn incite the same from characters beyond our view. Balin’s decisions become a link in chivalry’s ideological chain, and the tragedy of the Dolorous Stroke becomes the result of many foreseeable actions coming together, as opposed to Balin’s preordained destiny.

The Dolorous Stroke itself results from a chain of causal events made possible by chivalry’s ideals of violence, making all characters involved culpable, not just Balin. The Dolorous Stroke occurs when Balin strikes Pellam, but the events which cause this strike begin before Balin even enters Pellam’s castle. In this episode, Balin has come to Pellam’s feast with the explicit intention

of confronting Garlon, a villainous knight who roams the country while invisible, striking down unsuspecting travelers. He kills several of Balin's companions. One of the locals establishes that Garlon's reputation and habits are well known within the community: "he ys the mervaylyste knyght that ys now lyvyng: and he destroyeth many good knyghtes, for he goth invisible" (Malory 55). Despite the obvious cowardice of Garlon's technique, he is praised and accepted here, suggesting that Utherian chivalry values functional violence above honourable violence. By condoning Garlon, this idea of chivalry makes this situation possible in the first place.

But Balin continues the causal chain, contributing to the Dolerous Stroke, and his decision suggests that chivalry needs to be more flexible than he acknowledges for it to be just. Upon entering the castle, Balin is asked to give up his sword and answers, "that woll I nat, for hit ys the custom of my contrey a knyght allweyes to kepe hys wepyn with hym" (Malory 55). Because Balin's sword represents his chivalry, his refusal to leave the sword indicates that he will insist on his own ethics even when inside Pellam's castle, as opposed to deferring to the ethical standards of the host as tradition would dictate. Furthermore, Balin's brutality is foreshadowed through the use of the word "custom," which is consistently used by villainous figures: heroic knights often arrive at a castle where the custom puts them and others in unnecessary danger, and the host insists that this custom be followed because it is tradition. Thus Malory's diction establishes a connection between Balin and villains. Unlike those who become villainous because they adhere to villainous customs, knights need to adjust their behaviour when they encounter peaceable customs—such as leaving one's weapon at the door—and they need to adjust their ideals to the situation when making decisions instead of blindly following their ideology.

Inside Pellam's castle, Balin nearly decides to end the chain of causal events leading to the Dolerous Stroke, but ideological influences compel Balin to continue the confrontation. At the

feast, Balin finds Garlon quickly and has a surprising moment of self-reflection: “If I sle hym here, I shall nat ascape; and if I leve hym now, peraventure I shall never mete with hym agayne at such a stevyn, and mucche harme he woll do and he lyve” (55). Balin has learned from his beheading of the Lady of the Lake that attacking Garlon here would compel his host to retaliate in order to maintain his sense of chivalry. He weighs this risk against the likelihood that Garlon will attack more victims, debating if an act of brutality here is worthwhile because it will put an end to Garlon’s brutality. Before he can think further, however, Garlon engages with Balin, treating him rudely: “Garlonde aspyed that Balyn vysaged hym, so he com and slapped hym on the face with the backe of hys honde, and seyde, ‘Knyght, why beholdist thou me so? For shame, ete thy mete and do that thou come fore” (55). Balin reacts to this insult with characteristic rashness, “and rose hym up fersely and clave his hede to the sholdirs” (55). Balin nearly decides against brutality, but Garlon’s slap compels Balin to respond lest he be publicly shamed. Balin feels that he has no choice but to answer Garlon with violence; thus his adherence to Utherian chivalry leads to extreme and deadly violence.

As predicted, Balin’s slaying of Garlon compels Pellam to retaliate and the Dolerous Stroke is brought to fruition, demonstrating the catastrophic results of the Utherian conception of chivalric violence embodied by Balin. Seeing his brother beheaded, Pellam strikes at Balin and Balin’s “swerde braste in sundir” (56). The symbolism is plain in this moment: Balin’s chivalric ideology is now broken. This leads, however, to Balin searching for another weapon, finding “a mervaylous spere strangely wrought” (56), and striking Pellam: “Kynge Pellam felle downe in a sowghe. And therewith the castell brake, rooffe and wallis, and felle downe to the erthe...Ryght so lay Kynge Pellam and Balyne three dayes” (56). When Merlin foretold this event, he made reference to the “the stroke of Oure Lorde Jesu Cryste” (48) which primes the reader to connect the Dolerous

Stroke with Christ's crucifixion, a connection which is reinforced by Balin's sleeping for "three dayes" just as Christ lay dead for three days before his resurrection. There are two key differences here. First, Balin strikes with a spear, as opposed to being struck by a spear; Balin is enacting violence instead of being victim to it. Secondly, Christ's sacrifice was salvation for humankind, redeeming our sins; but through Balin's stroke "three contreyes ar destroyed" (57). The parallels between these two episodes invites comparison between Balin's and Christ's ideologies, and the comparison indicates that sometimes pacifism and humility yield better results than violence, for Christ's willingness to endure pain and death brought about improvement while Balin's seeking vengeance causes destruction. Together, Pellam's condoning of Garlon's invisible errantry, Balin's seeking out Garlon, Balin's refusal to give up his sword, Garlon's initiating slap against Balin, Balin's retaliation against Garlon, and then Pellam's retaliation against Balin, all contribute to the Dolerous Stroke, just as the Lady of the Lake, Lanceor, and Arthur all contributed earlier. Each of these characters makes decisions influenced by their conception of the chivalric ideal, and thus each of them advances the causal chain towards this calamitous event.

The final duel between Balin and Balan reinforces Malory's stance on chivalric violence and destiny as Balin's brutality causes his own destruction as well as the death of the person he loves most. Balin approaches this duel in a state of guilt, for he accepts that although "his intentions are good, everything he does results in tragedy" (Fowler 71). This guilt leads Balin to wish, "true to his word, to give up his life" (Kelly 95). When challenged with the local custom that he must joust with another knight, Balin gloomily accepts: "syn I shalle, therto I am redy...I wold be fayne ther my deth shold be" (Malory 58). Balin then allows another knight to give him a new shield, losing "the one remaining symbol of his identity" (Fowler 71). When told that this will put him in danger, he affirms his own role in choosing his destiny: "I maye not torne now ageyne for shame,

and what aventure shalle falle to me, be it lyf or dethe, I wille take the adventure that shalle come to me” (Malory 59). Shame prevents Balin from turning away because he remains committed to his ideals, confirming both the ideology’s role in Balin’s demise as well as his own. The duel is so ferocious that when Balan sees Balin’s face, he “myght not knowe hym by the vysage, it was so ful hewen and bledde” (60). In the end, both brothers die, tragically aware that they have slain each other. Balin may have sought to enact justice through his violence, but brutality was always present, too. The two brothers are laid to rest together in the tale’s final tomb: “Here lyeth Balyn le Sauvage that was the Knyght with the Two Swerdes and he that smote the Dolorous Stroke” (60). By burying them together, the narrative confirms their role as doubles, and the inscription memorializes Balin’s representation of brutality and justice through his epithet, as well as the tragic results of his ideals through the Dolerous Stroke.

This final episode affirms the complicated nature of Balin’s character, for despite all the unnecessary harm caused by Balin, Malory still describes him as one of the most exceptional knights of his time: “Thus endith the tale of Balyn and Balan...that were two passynge good knyghtes as ever were in tho dayes” (Malory 61). Balin’s destiny is his own, for “Balin chooses the path of the murderer, leading to blood feud, revenge, and death” (Fowler 72), and yet chivalry itself remains equally culpable as the narrative demonstrates Balin’s place within a much larger web of causal events. Balin’s words and actions indicate his “expression of guilt and a desire to pay his debt” (Kelly 96), showing that Balin at least recognizes the problems in his chivalry, proving the ideology’s capacity for improvement. Despite Balin’s Utherian chivalry and his tendency towards brutality, he seems to understand, respect, and desire the ideals that Arthurian chivalry offers. Thus he marks the transition between the two brands of chivalry. Balin, stuck

between his ideals and conscience, does the best he can to defend Arthur's reign in order that a less brutal ideology might develop; Lancelot is proof of his success.

Chapter 2:

The Worship of Sir Lancelot du Lac

In the previous chapter, I explored Balin's inability to distinguish between brutality and justice and the relationship between Balin's chivalry, his decisions, and their consequences. In Malory's "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake", Lancelot rarely struggles to distinguish between brutality and justice, resorting naturally to justice, and his choices suggest a shrewd awareness of his ideological position. Despite the comedic tone of this narrative and Lancelot's overwhelming prowess, people die violently in it, revealing the problems that persist within chivalry and which may therefore be inherent in its foundations. Most notably, prowess remains central to the chivalric ideal despite their living in a time of relative peace. Lancelot, whose formidable reputation maintains the Round Table's political and ideological hegemony, must therefore prove his prowess continually to sustain the kingdom's stability. This causes Lancelot to seek violence that is neither brutal nor just, but social, turning deeds of prowess into sport and perpetuating violence in a manner that generates adversaries within the community. Furthermore, the need to continually prove himself places an emotional burden on Lancelot which erodes his mental health, causing him to seek refuge in anonymity and disguise. Lancelot's tale depicts chivalry's dependence on violence as part of a spectrum of exchange that preserves ideological and political stability. The need for violence in chivalric society antagonizes the members of that society since that violence is inevitably directed towards them. Ultimately, the emotional burden of this responsibility makes Lancelot's position untenable because his reputation creates as many problems as it resolves.

Whereas Balin fought to help Arthur obtain political and ideological control, Lancelot fights to protect Arthur's political and ideological authority. Lancelot, as Arthur's greatest knight,

maintains the Round Table's dominance through his reputation, meaning he must perpetually fight to reinforce perceptions of his prowess even when enemies are sparse. Balin's tale shows how difficult it is for him to make the transition from being valued for his prowess in the context of a military conquest to being expected to restrain his performance of violence in the context of Arthur's subsequent reign. Lancelot's tale reveals that far from being a thing of the past, chivalric violence remained a vital part of demonstrating one's prowess under Arthur, though it was often expressed in different situations. Lancelot's tale begins in a time of peace, yet "all the knyghtys of the Rounde Table resorted unto the Kyng and made many joustys and turnementes" (Malory 151). Even during times of peace, prowess is still the standard for chivalric value. These jousts and tournaments allow knights to practice while measuring themselves against their comrades, and Malory establishes that Lancelot is the strongest of them all: "for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes" (151). Despite Arthur's ubiquitous sovereignty, chivalry's martial virtues bind Arthur's kingdom together, and despite Arthur's shift away from a focus on military conquest, prowess remains the paramount chivalric virtue. Because of this, "the burden of drawing together the Round Table knights and stabilizing the kingdom falls primarily on its most highly rated knight" (Lexton 77). Lancelot "becomes crucial to sustaining the collective political worship of the Round Table" (81). Lancelot must continually prove his prowess whether an acceptable adversary exists or not. The fear here seems to be that if Lancelot, and therefore the Round Table, were to be perceived as weak, then political and ideological adversaries would arise to challenge Arthur's dominion. The result of Lancelot's need to prove his prowess against the best possible adversaries is that he is compelled to seek adversaries among the other members of the Round Table, dividing Camelot into opposing factions and weakening Arthur's fellowship.

Lancelot's *perceived* prowess, not his actual prowess, stabilizes the kingdom. His public reputation is therefore more important than his personal merit when it comes to strengthening the Round Table's influence. This leads to a distinction between Lancelot's public and private selves, what Jesmok refers to as "name" and "identity" (27) respectively. His honour is also split into two parts, his personal, private honour, and the public form that Lexton refers to as *worship*: "Focused on publicly performed deeds and known reputation, worship—in contrast to the internalized virtue of honor—becomes a practice wherein the individual is driven to relentlessly and repeatedly enact his status and identity, his 'name', before the eyes of the Round Table community" (81). Just as chivalric violence split into brutality and justice, honour separates into a binary that helps distinguish its various functions. Worship is one's perceived abilities and accomplishments, while honour is one's internal sense of chivalric value. By these definitions, worship sustains the political and ideological stability of Arthur's kingdom, for it deters rebels and invaders from braving the justice of Arthur's Round Table. Jousts, tournaments, and deeds of arms become "the means by which characters render their identities legible" (Lexton 81), and they "must be *public and performative* in order to have the desired effect" (81). Lancelot's deeds of prowess extend beyond himself because his name buttresses Arthur's ideological and political control. He must therefore consider the Round Table's worship before his personal needs; he can no longer approach jousts or tournaments as games but must enhance the Round Table's worship with every encounter.

Because worship "depends on the estimation of others" (Jesmok 27), Lancelot must constantly earn his reputation or it will begin to wane. Whereas honour is understood as an intrinsic property, worship makes "knights inherently vulnerable to the forces of shame, slander, and, 'disworship,' the public undermining of an individual's reputation" (Lexton 88). Therefore, Lexton argues, "the Round Table knights, especially Lancelot, the best of them all, must constantly strive

toward a worship that is never entirely proven, achieved, or perfected” (88). This creates for Lancelot an “acute insecurity” (89) in his public position, encouraging a “negative compulsion to avoid disworship...as opposed to the positive drive to achieve worship” (89); with every encounter, Lancelot has much to lose but little to gain. He cannot refuse the challenges that come his way: he must participate in them for his worship “remains vital to the wholeness of the Arthurian court” (105). The implication here is that Lancelot must constantly achieve worship because the integrity of the kingdom is at stake.

If prowess is the primary measure of chivalry, then Lancelot can only win worship in violent situations. However, appropriate opponents may be few and far between in a time of relative peace. Opportunities to perform for worship become scarce, so opponents are created from within the community. Richard Sennett’s “The Spectrum of Exchange” (72), with exchange defined as “the experience of give and take” (72), can help explain how Lancelot can manage his worship without needing continuous external adversaries. Sennett identifies five levels on this spectrum: “altruistic exchange, which entails self-sacrifice; win-win exchange, in which both parties benefit; differentiating exchange, in which the partners become aware of their differences; zero-sum exchange, in which one party prevails at the expense of another; and winner-takes-all exchange, in which one party wipes out the other” (72). Each level provides a different combination of cooperation and competition, where the balance “is best and most clearly struck in the middle of the spectrum” (72). For the Arthurian knight, zero-sum and winner-takes-all exchanges are foundational to their world-view, as these are within the realm of traditional warfare that birthed chivalry in the first place. Altruistic, win-win, and differentiating exchanges, however, might seem alien to the martial vocation, but a couple of these levels have already been introduced: “turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth” (Malory 151). Tournaments and

jousts transform chivalric warfare into sport, converting winner-takes-all and zero-sum exchanges into differentiating, win-win, and, very occasionally (though not in this tale), altruistic exchanges: “By means of jousts and tournaments, the knights are able to increase their worship and prowess with noble deeds of arms. Such is the business of warriors during peacetime” (Goyne 39). In fact, Charny seems to anticipate Sennett’s spectrum when he identifies “the joust, the tournament, and war” (Kaeuper 33) as the three main spheres of chivalric activity, insisting repeatedly that “some feats of arm are of greater worth than others” (Charny 87). Chivalric violence can therefore spread across the spectrum of exchange, with different encounters providing different variables for Lancelot to navigate. This spectrum enables Lancelot to assert his worship without engaging in war.

Le Morte’s exploration of the chivalric ideal expands beyond the realm of war to consider how it asserts its ideals of violence in other spheres of chivalric life. Balin’s adventures generally concern themselves with life-or-death affairs, but Lancelot faces a spectrum of confrontations, from single jousts, to group tournaments, to deadly combat, each with their own value in the chivalric world. What this means for Lancelot is that Arthurian chivalry has shifted away from the zero-sum and winner-takes-all exchanges of Utherian Britain—such as when Balin kills Lanceor or when he aids Arthur in defeating Nero and Lot—towards the altruistic, win-win, and differentiating exchanges that are more salient in times of peace. This shift promotes competition that is heavily threaded with cooperation, encouraging Arthur’s knights to respect the welfare of their opponents, to prove themselves in worshipful deeds of arms without killing or maiming each other. Balin struggles to perceive the contextual nuances of his own limited situations, but Lancelot must navigate an even more varied set of circumstances each with their own expectations, restrictions, and stakes.

Paradoxically, Lancelot's noble tale presents a hero who must seek out violence in order to deter further violence, for his function is to prove himself the strongest knight, despite only occasionally encountering antagonists who deserve justice. Consequently, Lancelot must sometimes engage in violent encounters in which the violence is neither brutal nor just, but social. This divides chivalric deeds of prowess into the spectrum of exchange, creating a variety of social obligations which force Lancelot to balance the cooperative and competitive needs of every unique situation. Lancelot's role also provides him the opportunity to establish social norms through his example, and so long as he is successful, chivalry can be used "as a discourse to channel violence into forms productive for governance" (102). Lancelot not only maintains Arthurian chivalry, but he contributes to its definition. Through the ideology of chivalry, which idolizes the exploits of the individual knight errant, Lancelot is capable of shaping the culture of his times, for better and for worse, and Malory's *Morte* demonstrates the emotional burden this places on Lancelot while revealing the communal issues this system threatens.

From the beginning of Lancelot's tale he seems conscious of his responsibility as Arthur's champion, and there are hints that the burden of upholding the Round Table's worship already wears on him. Lancelot's adventure begins after he has "rested hym longe with play and game; and than he thought hymself to preve in straunge adventures, and bade his neveu, Sir Lyonell, for to make hym redy—"for we muste go seke adventures"' (Malory 152). This passage "presents a reason for Launcelot's expedition...Launcelot has achieved the pinnacle of honor at Arthur's court; further triumphs will have to come elsewhere" (Miller 29). By the end of the very same paragraph, however, Lancelot becomes tired and has a "grete luste to slepe" (Malory 152), so he naps, "And Sir Lyonell waked whyles he slepte" (152). Despite having just "rested hym longe", Lancelot is already tired, a weariness which is contrasted by Lionel's staying awake beside him. This

weariness suggests the “emotional burdens that accompany the traditionally physical ones associated with knighthood” (Goynes 41). Lancelot’s use of the verb “muste” indicates a sense of obligation. This obligation is Lancelot’s need to maintain his worship, for “it must be continually proved and proved again” (41), hinting that Lancelot undertakes a new adventure, whether or not he wanted or was ready for one, because the Round Table relies on his reputation. Lancelot’s tale begins with the ostensible desire to adventure with his nephew, but it also reveals that he sets out with a sense of obligation and fatigue that weigh on him, suggesting that chivalry’s masculine ideal demands constant performance of its practitioners, a requirement which drains Lancelot’s emotional health and eventually pits him against his comrades, contributing to Camelot’s inevitable divide.

Lancelot’s worship also causes him to be targeted by various villains, adding to the stress of his position. I will discuss two of these incidents. The first, in which Lancelot is captured by four queens, reveals the complicated nature of Lancelot’s worship as he balances the need to respond to his situation with the pressures of his reputation. This episode begins when the four queens find Lancelot sleeping. Morgan Le Fay puts an “inchauntement upon hym that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres” (Malory 154), and they carry him back to her castle to be their prisoner. When he wakes, they tell him, “because that we undirstonde youre worthynesse, that thou art the noblest knyght lyvyng...hit behovyth the now to chose one of us foure” (155); this is echoed shortly after by a damsel: “for the renowne and bounté that they here of you, they woll have your love” (155). Lancelot’s worship makes him desirable, and the queens attempt to force him into their service because he is Arthur’s greatest knight.

Lancelot is vulnerable in this situation because of the gender dynamics. If he relies on his greatest virtue, prowess, to escape, it would cost him his honour and worship: “Launcelot could

hardly raise his sword, lop off their heads, and remain knighthood's shining exemplar" (Goyne 43). The enchantment by which the queens capture Lancelot may be read literally or figuratively, for readers are invited to ask, "Is Launcelot literally powerless in the face of her magic spell...Or are his hands figuratively tied by his chivalric promise to help women, and certainly never to harm or kill them?" (43). The queens leverage Lancelot's understanding of the chivalric code to their advantage, for Lancelot cannot resist them because chivalry forbids violence against noble women. This scenario reveals "that the qualities of knighthood shoring up the Round Table itself are not always effective in deciding right and bringing about justice" (43), for when Lancelot "must function without the benefit of arms" (43) he becomes essentially powerless. By predicating a political and ideological system on violence, chivalry has the potential to make knights vulnerable by turning them away from other means of navigating challenging social exchanges.

Ironically, Lancelot's prowess is ultimately what saves him because a woman who recognizes its value offers him an exchange that promises to be win-win. One of Morgan le Fey's ladies recognizes Lancelot and proposes to make a deal that will provide him with his freedom in exchange for his services: "sir, they sey youre name is Sir Launcelot du Lake, the floure of knyghtes...and ye wolde promyse me to helpe my fadir on Tewsyday next commynge...by the grace of God I shall delyver you" (Malory 155). Lancelot agrees after learning her father's name and judging him "a noble kyng and a good knyght" (156), for he will not serve anyone of disworship "lest the cause he would espouse be one which would dishonor him" (Miller 32). Win-win exchanges are often predicated on "goods of ambiguous or unknown value" (Sennett 78) because a "scarcity of goods does not promote the win-win exchange" (78). In this case, one party posits the potential for value—Lancelot's prowess—and the other party will offer concrete goods—Lancelot's freedom—in exchange for that potential. This situation reveals that Lancelot's

worship can act as a sort of currency, affording him a marketable service for which others will gladly trade, or in the case of the queens, attempt to steal, with the trust that Lancelot will honour the agreement and perform with prowess when the time comes. In this episode, then, Lancelot's worship makes him a target of the queens' desire, and his desire to maintain his worship renders him powerless to escape. His worship also acts as a currency, for it allows him to exchange the potential for service for his freedom. His worship in this case and in others turns out to be both the problem and the solution.

The second incident I will now consider again reveals the problems created by Lancelot's worship by focusing on the way that his name provokes antagonism. The knight Tarquin has killed, injured, or captured numerous knights, many of them of the Round Table, on account of his hate for Lancelot, who slew his brother: "And for Sir Launcelottis sake I have slayne an hondred good knyghtes, and as many I have maymed" (Malory 161). Here, Lancelot's worship undermines peace, for Tarquin deliberately seeks out violence in response to Lancelot's deeds of arms, and the victims now number in the hundreds. Lancelot can still save some of them, however, so he engages with Tarquin in battle. Tarquin does not know he is fighting Lancelot, so after an intense contest Tarquin gains respect for his opponent and offers to "delyver all the presoners that I have...so be hit that thou be nat Sir Launcelot" (161). Lancelot, speaking to himself, gives a surprisingly reflective answer: "'Now se I will,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'that such a man I myght be, I myght have pease; and suche a man I myghte be that there sholde be mortall warre betwyxte us'" (162). Lancelot is essentially given two options: lie to Tarquin and rescue his comrades without further bloodshed or be honest and fight Tarquin to the death.

Lancelot recognizes that he has to make a decision about whether to make a zero-sum exchange—by denying his name, granting Tarquin his life, and thus freeing the prisoners—or to

turn the situation into a winner-takes-all exchange—by claiming his name, killing Tarquin, and taking everything he owns. Lancelot chooses the latter: “I woll that thou wete and know that I am Sir Launcelot du Lake, Kynges Bannys son of Benwyke, and verry knyght of the Table Rounde. And now I defyghe the—and do thy beste!” (162). Perhaps Lancelot felt that Tarquin deserved justice, but by claiming his name on three fronts—his personal name, his lineage, and the Round Table—Lancelot suggests that his concern is really for worship. Tarquin’s disdain for Lancelot’s name caused this problem, and since Tarquin has defeated many of Lancelot’s comrades, there is a need to redeem the Round Table’s collective worship: “Lancelot’s fight against Tarquin takes on both individual and communal meaning as he attempts to undo the disgrace done to the entire fellowship. In this moment, Lancelot becomes the de facto holder of the community’s worship and its defense against shame” (Lexton 98). Lancelot needs to protect his name and the worship of the Round Table. Lying would not only have allowed the problem to persist but may have damaged his reputation. What this incident reveals is that Lancelot’s name seems to invite some of the most capable knights to challenge him in order to make a name for themselves. Lancelot’s worship may discourage rebellion in a general sense, but his prowess also seems to draw out more fearsome opponents who threaten the lives of lesser knights all over Arthur’s kingdom. Furthermore, the chivalric promotion of prowess creates strong knights within Arthur’s kingdom who have the potential to become adversaries themselves, perpetuating violence. Even in a time of peace, chivalry creates the conditions for violence, for challengers to Lancelot will always need to prove themselves through prowess, and Lancelot will be obliged to respond with violence. Chivalry cannot avoid the violence on which it is founded.

The true burden on Lancelot’s shoulders, however, lies in the fact that he must be morally virtuous while he defeats Tarquin. As Arthur’s strongest knight, Lancelot represents the worship

and culture of the Round Table's chivalry, but if Lancelot were himself problematic—if he were despotic, corrupt, or cruel—and if Malory had chosen to focus this story on Lancelot's faults as opposed to his heroism, then Tarquin's resistance against the Round Table would have been that of a righteous rebel against tyranny. Chivalry promises and relies upon the benevolence of powerful individuals. If Lancelot did not uphold Arthur's ideals of generosity and mercy, then the Round Table, which he embodies, would be no better than any of the courts Arthur conquered. A system founded on violence is bound to that violence because its power and influence are secured through prowess. Prowess, however, does not guarantee virtue, while power and influence are famously effective at corrupting morals and ethics. Moreover, Lancelot's benevolence is contingent on his prowess: it will likely be understood as weakness when his strength fails due to age or misfortune.

Lancelot's capture by the four queens and his fight with Tarquin bring into focus the dangers and responsibilities of Lancelot's position. His actions have consequences that reach much further than his immediate social network, and his worship will eventually draw antagonists who wish to make a name for themselves. Lancelot must therefore be conscious of his behaviour lest he threaten the equilibrium of Arthur's kingdom, and this stresses Lancelot's personal identity: "he seems to be struggling to move comfortably into the heroic persona that others see, to make his sense of self congruent with his name" (Jesmok 28). As the narrative continues, Lancelot will on two occasions "take another chivalric name...play at being other than he is" (32). Using disguises, Lancelot takes chivalric action without the responsibility of being "the greatest living knight" (27), pursuing his private chivalric honour without the burden of maintaining his public chivalric worship. I turn now to these occasions, exploring how they reveal Lancelot's conflicting emotions regarding his position as Arthur's most important knight.

Lancelot first hides his identity when he fights for King Bagdemagus in a tournament, and while he does this to protect the Round Table's worship, further showing the complicated nature of his position, he becomes "wroth oute of mesure" when fighting his comrades, revealing the subconscious animosity that results in the Round Table's inner divisions. In this tournament, Lancelot insists that Bagdemagus dress three knights and Lancelot in identical, non-descript shields in order to hide Lancelot's identity: "And thus shall I not be knowyn what maner a knyght I am" (Malory 158). Lancelot does this because he is fighting on the opposing side of "knights of Arthur's court, his own sworn comrades" (Goyne 44). He understands that a significant aspect of the Round Table's worship is their unity "in chivalric action, their joint worship creating the impression of satellite knights revolving around Arthur's sun as he stands at the hub of a successful court" (Lexton 80). Lancelot wants to avoid the inevitable rumour of conflict that would arise should they be seen competing against each other. Lancelot only agreed to fight for Bagdemagus because he is an honourable king, but it could be considered unseemly for Round Table knights to fight on behalf of opposing kings. Furthermore, if Lancelot were asked to explain why he fights for Bagdemagus, it would mean admitting that he was made prisoner, potentially harming his worship. But Lancelot has no choice: having given his word to Bagdemagus's daughter, it would be dishonourable to withdraw from his commitment, also jeopardizing his worship. His promise to the lady and his oath to the Round Table come into conflict, demonstrating "that even the greatest of knights cannot always control his own destiny, and that choices do not always fall into black or white categories when debts of honor force one into conflict with sworn loyalties" (Goyne 44). In this case, Lancelot's anonymity protects the Round Table's worship while allowing him to compete against foes who would normally avoid him, thereby improving his individual worship when his identity is revealed at the end of the narrative.

In the tournament field, Lancelot seems eager to use his prowess to its fullest extent, showing his desire to express his chivalric identity now that his name has been stripped. When jousting with the three Round Table knights—Madore, Mordred, and Gahalantine—Lancelot first brings Madore to the ground, horse and all, “that his sholdir wente oute of joynte” (Malory 159), before giving Mordred “suche a buffette that the arson of the sadil brake, and so he drove over the horse tayle that his helme smote into the erthe a foote and more, that nyghe his nek was broke” (159). Finally, when fighting Gahalantine he becomes “wroth oute of mesure, and than he smote Sir Gahalantyne on the helme, that his nose, erys and mowthe braste oute on bloode—and therewith his hede hynghe low, and with that his horse ran away with hym, and he felle downe to the erthe” (159). Lancelot does not fight like a hidden ally but a veritable foe, injuring and embarrassing three of his Round Table comrades. This ferocity may be a consequence of pent-up frustration resulting from Lancelot’s constant self-management, or it may result from a genuine dislike for these knights. Regardless of the reason, with anonymity protecting his name, Lancelot tests the limits of his chivalric prowess and, therefore, his chivalric identity without restraining his emotions or actions for the sake of public perception, thereby asserting his sense of self in a manner usually unavailable to him.

This experiment comes at a price, for by neglecting to show mercy to his opponents, Lancelot signals the conflicting emotions he harbors while embarrassing those whose goodwill on which he will inevitably depend. With his worship protected by anonymity, Lancelot alters his standard approach to this zero-sum exchange, ignoring the fact that healthy “competition must leave losers something so that they can try again, and are willing to continue competing” (Sennett 84). Lancelot takes his victory too far by both injuring and humbling the three Round Table knights. By doing so, however, he reveals the frustrated emotions that now come bursting forth

while anonymity allows him to express himself without filter: “Lancelot is the greatest of Arthur’s knights, but a part of him wants to leave that name behind, to attack and even humiliate the Round Table community” (Jesmok 34). Later, when all the knights return to court and Lancelot’s adventures are reported to the Round Table community, some knights are pleased to discover that it was Lancelot who had overcome them: “Than there was lawghying and smylyng amonge them...Whan they wyste that, they were glad” (Malory 176). But when Gahalantine, Madore, and Mordred are made aware that it was Lancelot who had so brutally defeated them, there is no mention of their reaction, suggesting they suffer their displeasure quietly. The Round Table’s worship may have been preserved, but the contrasting reactions of the various knights signals the inevitable divide within the community created by chivalry’s reliance on violence; Lancelot’s attempt to joust without the burden of his name plants the first seeds of discord between Lancelot and Mordred, a discord which bears terrible fruit later in the *Morte*. Lancelot’s strength is a responsibility, and although he is conscious of this, his experiment in shirking that responsibility comes with a cost, alienating members of his community and generating antagonism.

Lancelot seems to have enjoyed his experiment with anonymity, for he undertakes a similar one shortly after when he masquerades as Sir Kay. Through these adventures Lancelot adds to the Round Table’s collective worship while enjoying the chivalric deeds which normally tax his mental and emotional health. These adventures begin after Lancelot rescues Kay from a trio of knights and forces them to yield themselves to Guenevere under Kay’s name. That night, Lancelot and Kay sleep side by side as guests in a nearby castle. Lancelot arises before Kay and “toke Sir Kayes armoure and his shyld” (Malory 167), departing on adventures disguised as his comrade. When Kay finds Lancelot gone along with his armour and shield he says, “on hym knyghtes woll be bolde and deme that hit is I—and that woll begyle them” (167). Lancelot again hides his identity.

But instead of taking on anonymity, this time he takes on the name and worship of another well-known—though less well respected—knight, setting himself up for adventures that he could not have as Lancelot: “Kay is both arrogant and weak, so knights enjoy humbling him. By assuming Kay’s name and reputation, Lancelot can humiliate Kay’s tormentors while light-heartedly jousting with knights who would otherwise avoid him because of his strength and reputation” (Jesmok 33). His ploy pays off quickly, for soon three knights challenge Lancelot believing him to be “the proude Sir Kay” (Malory 168). Unsurprisingly, Lancelot easily overpowers them, and they conclude that it is not Kay beneath the armour: “welle we know ye ar not Sir Kay” (169). Regardless, Lancelot instructs them to “yelde you unto Dame Gwenyvere...and sey that Sir Kay sente you unto hir” (169). They become the second set of knights sent by Lancelot to yield themselves under Kay’s name.

By ordering the defeated knights to yield to Kay, Lancelot is able to increase the Round Table’s worship without the burden of performing as the famous Lancelot, performing his duty without straining his emotional health. The idea that “public knowledge creates, protects, and impacts, worship” (Lexton 87) is shown at the end of Lancelot’s tale when “Arthur’s court celebrates Lancelot’s success and validates his worship” (87). The brief moment when the three knights “yelded them unto Sir Kay” (Malory 176) becomes a moment where it is Kay’s name that is acknowledged, not Lancelot’s. While the facts are quickly corrected, this brief and public moment helps Lancelot on two fronts: first, knights encountering Kay might now pause to consider if it might not be a more formidable foe hidden beneath the armour, ultimately aiding in discouraging opposition to the Round Table; second, Lancelot’s ploy has made it clear that the Round Table is a community of knights, and that on a metaphorical level his sword *is* Kay’s sword, and that his worship is shared among his weaker companions. Burdened with the Round Table’s

reputation, Lancelot elevates the collective worship of the court by masquerading as one of his comrades, and in doing so relieves some of the pressure on himself to perform.

Lancelot's comportment when defeating the three knights indicates that his experiences with anonymity have allowed him to explore his personal chivalric identity as well. Here, he is not nearly as rough as he was with Madore, Gahalantine, and Mordred. When one of the knights, Sir Raynold, seeks to continue their contest, Lancelot stops him: "'Now let be,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'I was not far frome the whan thou were made knyght, Sir Raynolde, and also I know thou arte a good knyght, and lothe I were to sle the'" (Malory 169). His courtesy prompts the like from his opponent: "'Grammercy,' seyde Sir Raynolde, 'of your goodnesse, and I dare say as for me and my bretherne, we woll nat be loth to yelde un unto you'" (169). This dialogue establishes an entirely different mood compared to his fight with Mordred's trio: "Lancelot's gentle tone and use of the familiar 'thou' show affection for his adversary; although enjoying his disguise, he is trying hard not to hurt anyone" (Jesmok 33). Even in disguise, Lancelot mentors these rookie knights, exhibiting as the stronger warrior an example of courteous behaviour to which they can look for guidance. Whereas his behaviour during the tournament left his opponents with very little, Lancelot is now following the rules of a cooperative zero-sum exchange, where "the winner will leave something for the loser" (Sennett 84), encouraging future participation and promoting cooperation within competitive environments. Lancelot learned from his first trial in anonymity, balancing his desire to act out of character while still providing the chivalric leadership on which the Round Table depends, showing how Lancelot's experiment with namelessness has allowed him to discover more about himself and his role as Arthur's champion.

In Lancelot's second encounter as Sir Kay, his exchange does nothing for his worship, yet he seems to have more fun than in any other part of the narrative, demonstrating Lancelot's

relationship to his position as Arthur's champion. Here, he is confronted by four knights, this time of Arthur's court: Sagamore, Ector, Uwain, and Gawain. They also think that Lancelot is Sir Kay and, wishing to "preve Sir Kayes myght" (Malory 169), they challenge him to joust. But once again, none are a match for Lancelot, and having defeated all four without breaking a lance, "Sir Launcelot passed on a pace, and smyled and seyde, 'God gyff hym joy that this spere made, for there cam never a bettir in my honde!'" (170). Lancelot has fun with "his charade, where he can encounter close comrades like Ector and Gawain, do homage to Guinevere, and enjoy himself in the process...On a deeper level, however, he momentarily retreats from being the 'flore of all knyghtes'" (Jesmok 34). As a "second string and...mediocre knight" (34), Lancelot can enjoy himself as Arthur's chief knight cannot, and it is for this reason that he exhibits this "rare sense of fun" (34) and why his spear feels so good in his hand, for it is the spear of another knight who does not carry the collective worship of his kingdom with every joust. But the fact that this fun is rare, that Jesmok describes Lancelot as typically being a "serious, strait-laced hero" (26), points to the darker problem beneath this harmless ruse, "suggesting Lancelot's unease with his name and persona as he disappears behind Kay's lesser name" (34). Lancelot's joy in disguise suggests the distress of competing as himself, implying the unsustainability of his public position.

Lancelot never orders these four Round Table knights to yield themselves to Guenevere under Kay's name, exempting them from that humiliation. This subtle difference shifts this from a zero-sum exchange into a differentiating exchange. By not forcing them to submit publicly, Lancelot is not gaining worship at their expense—and why would he? As companions, their worship is largely collective. But an exchange still occurs, for the two parties "come away from the encounter with a sharper personal understanding of their own interests, their own desires or their own values" (Sennett 79). The four knights come away humbled, yet still they "comforted

eche other” (Malory 170). They bond through their shared experience of adversity. Lancelot, for his part, comes away having rediscovered his joy for chivalric sport, coming one step closer to understanding the emotional turmoil of his position as Arthur’s champion, knowing now that it is not knighthood itself but his position within knighthood that causes him so much inner conflict.

Navigating the variety of violent exchanges with which his position is tasked, Lancelot must consider the Round Table’s worship above his personal needs. In Malory’s “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake”, these issues are presented humorously and jovially, providing an interesting look at Lancelot by “perceptively probing Lancelot’s sense of self” (Jesmok 26). What we see, however, is that his position requires that he pursue violence and that his worship creates as many problems as it solves, not only for Lancelot, who no longer finds joy in chivalric deed and sport, but for the community at large as his name becomes a catalyst for antagonists who rebel against his justice or who wish to claim his chivalry for themselves. And so, when given the chance, he disappears into anonymity or into the identity of another knight, relieving himself of those burdens. Ultimately, the story demonstrates that one knight cannot uphold chivalry alone, for even Lancelot, the greatest knight in Arthur’s kingdom, if not the world, cannot uphold Arthur’s chivalry, and he must play at being several persons in order to fulfill the duties his role requires of him. But this burden takes its toll, and Lancelot suffers extreme emotional anxiety as a result: “the literature presents the difficulties and anxieties, and in extreme cases it shows how the conflicting demands of chivalry can cause the breakdown of an individual who tries to meet all such demands perfectly” (McClain 194). This loneliness is not for the other knights’ lack of effort: other knights follow Lancelot in his adventures, “ostensibly to help him or to bring him back to Camelot, but no less to attempt to match or excel the glory of Launcelot. They are doomed to failure” (Miller 30). Arthur’s court makes much of his accomplishments. They are more than willing to share in his

worship as stories of his adventures “assert a commonality of experience shared by the society as a whole, rather than a celebration of individual prowess. Everyone participates in the exploits of the one, thereby creating not only a common memory, but a criterion for behavior shared by all” (Goyne 47). They celebrate him as the greatest, willing to include themselves as part of his company and seeking to emulate his behaviour. But as many readers know, Lancelot inevitably falls from this grace as his affair with Guenevere is made known, and the same community who now celebrates him will eventually scorn him. His fall precipitates the fall of Camelot itself, revealing the two-sided nature of their reliance on Lancelot’s individual efforts to uphold their political and ideological stability. Chivalry’s dependence on violence for political and ideological unity grants Lancelot more influence and responsibility than he can comfortably wield and ultimately creates adversaries from within as Lancelot continuously seeks out violent exchanges in which to prove his worship. The violence which brought Britain under Arthur’s control is ineffective at stabilizing that same kingdom, and chivalry’s ideals inevitably produce the knights who destroy it.

Chapter 3:

Gwenhwyfar and The Myth of Woman

The first two chapters explore chivalry's reliance on violence for stability and control through the centrality of prowess in Balin and Lancelot's chivalric identities. But many cannot express themselves through violence because economic or social barriers prevent them from taking up arms. This chapter considers Gwenhwyfar (Guenevere) in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley's text enjoyed "both academic and trade success" (McClain 197) when published in 1982, and whether this popularity resulted in part from recent Arthurian productions such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Excalibur* (1981) or from other influences, Bradley's novel obviously resonated with readers due to the parallels it offers between Arthur's historical setting and Bradley's contemporary moment. Furthermore, since it presents Arthurian fiction from various female perspectives, it offers a useful contrast to Malory's androcentric *Morte*. This chapter will explain how Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of "the myth of woman" (1265) from *The Second Sex* provides a framework of ideas for understanding the way that Bradley represents the relationship between Gwenhwyfar's inherited ideology and her lived experience. In *The Mists of Avalon*, chivalry's conventional views of femininity deny Gwenhwyfar access to prowess, so she cannot perform the central virtue of chivalric ideology. As a noble woman, she is instead assigned "two crucial responsibilities: to seal alliances made by their relatives, and to bear the children that would inherit family lands in the next generation" (Holdorph 11). Whereas chivalric men are defined by their prowess, women are defined by their relationship to men: the women in Arthurian Britain are expected to defer to men and to bear children. Gwenhwyfar seems to accept these expectations, so when she finds she is unable to bear a child she also finds she has "no outlet for her instincts and attempt[s] to cripple all around her in consequence" (Paxson 119).

One way she accomplishes this is by embracing some of the most patriarchal aspects of medieval Christianity, as Bradley conceives of it. Gwenhwyfar's experience and choices reveal how the elevation of chivalric prowess contributed to an ideology that was as dangerous for women as it was for men.

The parallels between Bradley's representation of Gwenhwyfar in *The Mists of Avalon* and de Beauvoir's ideas in *The Second Sex* make de Beauvoir's text a useful resource for interpreting Gwenhwyfar's experience. Bradley's representation of Gwenhwyfar suggests that she was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* either directly or indirectly. It is hard to imagine that Bradley was not familiar to some extent with de Beauvoir's work, considering that *The Second Sex* "provided the theoretical basis for the emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of feminist activism in both Europe and North America" (Leitch 1261). Much of Bradley's writing during these decades "focused on and explored issues relating to female self-determination and power" (Paxson 113), which is unsurprising considering that Bradley once stated that "women's liberation is the great event of the twentieth century" (113). Whether she was thinking explicitly of *The Second Sex* or not, Bradley's work demonstrates several of de Beauvoir's ideas in *The Mists of Avalon*, making de Beauvoir's text useful for understanding the way Bradley represents Gwenhwyfar's experience. The most important of these ideas is de Beauvoir's myth of woman, which describes the process whereby western culture's ideals of femininity have been mythologized, establishing an unrealistic, unchanging, and deterministic feminine ideal. De Beauvoir considers the feminine ideal to be a "static myth" (1265) which "projects into the realm of Platonic ideas... a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, necessary" (1265). This ideal is based upon and promotes the idea that there can be such a thing as an objectively perfect woman whose qualities are both inevitable and essential, linking it to biological determinism, which argues

that biological sex and social gender closely correlate and that the key characteristics of the feminine ideal result from female anatomy. This ideal contributes significantly to the pressure imposed on Gwenhwyfar that she produce a child. The myth of woman is based on the principle that the terms female and women are nearly, if not entirely, synonymous. It also assumes whiteness is the norm. I think it is important to acknowledge that here even though this chapter does not take an intersectional approach. Instead, this chapter focuses on the way that the myth of woman helps to articulate the processes whereby Gwenhwyfar is molded and controlled by her father and the church as well as the consequences of this upbringing.

The myth of woman, as de Beauvoir describes it, creates a dichotomy between two archetypes, both of which can be used to create shame. Although some of the details of the myth change in every era “in accordance with their needs” (1267), de Beauvoir insists that it always exists as a binary that establishes one positive and one negative womanly archetype: “the Muse, the Goddess Mother, Beatrice” (1266) and “the Praying Mantis, the Mandrake, the Demon (1266). For de Beauvoir, as for Malory and Bradley, any women could potentially be both archetypes: “all women had the potential to emulate Mary, but all also had the sin of Eve within them” (Holdorph ix). However, “each of the myths built up around the subject of woman is intended to sum her up *in toto*” (de Beauvoir 1266), meaning that the myth of woman refuses to acknowledge “the strange incoherencies manifested by the idea of Femininity” (1266). This often led to the conclusion that if one were not Mary, the ideal woman, then one had to be her antithesis, Eve, for the myth of woman cannot contain contradictory ideals within the same subject: to acknowledge women’s inherent human contradictions would be to acknowledge her potential beyond the traditional roles assigned by the ruling patriarchy. The result of this inflexible dichotomy is that women are shamed for failing to live up to the myth of woman’s unrealistic feminine ideal or for embodying its

opposite—and often both. Thus, the myth of woman establishes a feminine standard that often leads to shame.

The feminine ideal created by the myth of woman is largely controlled and maintained by male voices, denying women control of their own identities and defining them in ways that are mainly beneficial to men. The lack of self-definition is one of the major differences between feminine ideals and masculine ones: “the categories in which men think of the world are established *from their point of view, as absolute*” (1268). From de Beauvoir’s particular moment within feminism and within the context of *The Mists of Avalon*, women have therefore had far less say in defining femininity than men have had in defining masculinity. Moreover, if influential women resist the myth, representing modes of femininity that challenge the established ideal, de Beauvoir writes, “we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but the women concerned are not feminine” (1265). Thus the myth of woman remains “the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless” (1265). De Beauvoir’s insight that femininity has mainly been determined by male voices also provides insight into how men have used this power: “Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman: it justified all privileges and even authorizes her abuse” (1267). For example, medieval women have long been expected to demonstrate at least seven of the nine virtues associated with chivalric men: loyalty, franchise, largesse, courtesy, faith, devotion, and piety (courage might be included but certainly not prowess). Failure to exhibit each one of these qualities may have had serious consequences for knights, but it would lead a woman to be read as another Eve. The asymmetrical consequences points to the reason that men created the myth in the first place, according to de Beauvoir: “We can see now that the myth is in large part explained by its usefulness to man” (1271). The myth of woman therefore establishes a feminine ideal that is controlled by and can be largely beneficial to men.

In *The Mists of Avalon*, Gwenhwyfar largely conforms to the myth of woman's positive model, which has her identify with patriarchal Christian values. Gwenhwyfar fulfills the "Pale Maiden" (Hughes 24) archetype, who "finds her roots in the myths of Artemis, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Brigid" (24) and therefore corresponds to de Beauvoir's Muse, Mother Goddess, and Beatrice. The Pale Maiden is typically associated with physical beauty, and she represents "the traditional espoused values of the community" (25). There seems to be a reciprocal relationship here: to conform is to be beautiful and *vice versa*. The values Gwenhwyfar adopts are those of the Christian church, which require a "narrow-minded devotion to Christianity" (25) in *The Mists of Avalon*. She also adopts the norms of "patriarchal Britain, which narrowly defined the roles of a woman in society...she is to be daughter, wife, queen, and eventually, mother" (25). Put simply, Gwenhwyfar is the product of the established cultural values of her time and place. Her acceptance and enactment of these values make her "the perfect Christian woman" (25) from one perspective or "a thoroughly priest-ridden and up-tight Christian lady" (Fry 73) from another. Gwenhwyfar seems to embrace the ideology in which she has been steeped, to use Althusser's term, and her refusal to resist the repressive teachings of the priests and her father cause many readers to find her a frustrating character. This frustration results from the readers' desire to see Gwenhwyfar break free of this unhealthy influence, causing readers to question the ideology which puts her in this position to begin with.

Gwenhwyfar is not without redeeming qualities, for her narrative revolves around her struggle to fulfill the unrealistic feminine ideal presented to her while remaining conscious to the reality of her lived experiences. Many readers find Gwenhwyfar to be "the least sympathetic" (Paxson 119) of Bradley's point-of-view characters. Under the guidance of the "misogynistic, fanatical, priest with his paranoid rantings—Bishop Patricius" (124), Gwenhwyfar "exemplifies

an extreme anti-feminist and reactionary Christian position” (119), an “antithesis of enlightenment” (124). Gwenhwyfar seems to be a prisoner of her culture’s narrowly defined ideal of femininity because she seems to accept it, demonstrating the overwhelming strength of dominant ideologies; Gwenhwyfar turns against herself before questioning the system in which she was raised. This is why Gwenhwyfar may be the *least sympathetic* of Bradley’s point-of-view characters but is not an entirely *unsympathetic* character, for she is only one example of a woman who embraces what she was taught as a young woman. The women in *The Mists of Avalon* “are formed—in some cases warped—by the environment in which they are raised” (120). Gwenhwyfar struggles against this warping, creating sympathy and elevating her beyond “the conventional Pale Maiden, simply ‘the sinless blonde’” (Hughes 24), into a full-fledged three-dimensional character. She fights “to find meaning in life and achieve something” (Paxson 120) as she navigates the incongruities between what she was taught and her lived experiences. The myth of woman creates an unrealistic and deterministic feminine ideal used to control women in ways largely beneficial to men by identifying women as either angels or devils. Instead of resisting this model, Gwenhwyfar seems to accept the angelic archetype defined by men seeks to embody it.

Gwenhwyfar’s introduction depicts her willingness to be defined by men. She is introduced near the isle of Avalon, where Morgaine and Lancelot have found her wandering through the mists. Morgaine offers to guide her through the marsh, but Lancelot “stepped in front of her, picked up the young girl, and carried her to dry land, setting her down” (157). Whereas Morgaine’s responds by wanting to teach Gwenhwyfar to navigate the waters herself, Lancelot simply picks her up and carries her to dry land without asking. This act, while momentarily helpful, ultimately harms Gwenhwyfar, for it prevents her from learning a new skill. Lancelot then asks “Who are you? Who is your father?” (157), and she answers, “My father is King Leodegranz...but I am here at school

in the convent” (157). When asked to identify herself, Gwenhwyfar identifies her father without giving her own name, indicating not only that her identity is closely linked to her father’s but that her first reaction is to identify herself in that way. Shortly later, Morgaine remarks on Lancelet’s and Gwenhwyfar’s similar social upbringing: “this exquisite golden creature belonged to his own world” (158). Thus Bradley suggests that Lancelet’s impulse to carry Gwenhwyfar and her immediate compliance are both learned responses. Morgaine recognizes that men have been trained to perform tasks for Gwenhwyfar and that she has been trained to accept their service.

This episode also demonstrates Gwenhwyfar’s devotion to her Christian faith and the prejudices that accompany that faith. When stuck in the marshes, crying and panicked, Gwenhwyfar makes the sign of the cross for comfort (157), establishing her identification with her Christian faith. This faith also leads Gwenhwyfar to judge Morgaine harshly: “Are you one of the fairy people? You have that blue sign on your forehead...you cannot be a demoness, you do not vanish when I cross myself, as the sisters say any demon must do—but you are little and ugly like the fairy people” (157). Morgaine shows Gwenhwyfar kindness when she offers to help her from the marsh, but Gwenhwyfar returns this kindness with insults, calling her ugly when Morgaine could also be called a “wild beauty” (Hughes 25). By focusing on superficial features such as Morgaine’s religious symbol and her looks, Gwenhwyfar demonstrates her intolerance to other faiths as well as her bias against non-traditional forms of beauty. Furthermore, her assumption that Morgaine is morally wicked based on her appearance reveals the way that a woman might invoke the myth of woman to judge other women in the same way men do.

When Gwenhwyfar enters the story as a point-of-view character, her relationship to her father depicts how she was raised to be obedient to and dependent on men. The first sentence from Gwenhwyfar’s perspective echoes her introduction as a character, for it suggests she sees herself

in relation to her father: “Gwenhwyfar, daughter of King Leodegranz” (251). Gwenhwyfar consistently tries to shape her behaviour according to his desires. When she tries to explain her fear of open spaces to her father, he responds by “shouting that he’d have none of that womanish nonsense in his house—and so she had learned never to whisper it aloud” (252). This fear is a fundamental part of Gwenhwyfar’s character, but when asked to explain her fears Gwenhwyfar can only answer: “it was the very weight of all that sky and the wide lands which frightened her” (252). Gwenhwyfar “felt safer indoors, as a rule, or when securely enclosed” (251). This fear itself stems from her father’s overbearing parenting, for without the opportunity to explore the lands beyond her walls Gwenhwyfar never develops courage in opposition to that fear. Furthermore, his comments and rebukes only serve to confirm her perspective that she cannot take care of herself. She learned “that it displeased her father if she spoke out boldly” (254), for he regards her as a “featherhead” (254) who is lost “if she goes three steps from her own doorway” (254). When she says, “I’d be afraid to be the High Queen!” (256), he answers, “You’re afraid of everything, anyway... That’s why you need a man to take care of you... You must trust me to know what’s best for you. That’s what I’m here for, to look after you and make you a good marriage with a trusty man to look after my pretty little featherhead” (256). Her father’s words cause Gwenhwyfar to believe that she is “very stupid” (255), and so her fears are, paradoxically, justified nonsense: nonsense because Leodegranz cannot understand them, but justified because Gwenhwyfar is perceived to be incompetent. Consequently, she defers to her father in all matters, believing herself incompetent and her opinions worthless.

This dependence is no accident, for it restricts Gwenhwyfar—and other noble women like her—to activities beneficial to the patriarchy. Gwenhwyfar’s initial reliance on male figures limits her ability to act independently, and because “an existent is nothing other than what he does...one

can say absolutely nothing about her” (de Beauvoir 1269). As she comes into her role as queen, however, she develops competence in those activities expected of her position. For Gwenhwyfar and the women in her court, this means “cookery and herbs and simples and the binding of wounds” (Bradley 255). Gwenhwyfar is also expected to spin cloth and manage food supplies although she must “ask Cai whether there is a sheep or a kid for slaughter...about the stock kept for meat” (307). The women are left with chores while the men are off having adventures to show their prowess.

The result is that “the man is busy, the woman idle” (de Beauvoir 1269), causing Gwenhwyfar’s court to descend into boredom. They wish for “a wedding to break the monotony of the summer...a babe to fuss and coo over” (Bradley 304). Even Morgaine, who loathes this lifestyle’s tedium, worries that with enough time she would become the witch—the myth—they believe her to be, “peddling charms and prophesying boy— or girl—children and new lovers for the maidens, from sheer boredom at the pettiness of life among the women” (308). With no entertainment but “gossiping over the little affairs of the day” (305), these women embody de Beauvoir’s conception of women made subservient by the myth of woman: “they *do* nothing, they fail to *make themselves* anything” (1270). Such women begin to identify most strongly with their “roles as family members, wives, and mothers” (Holdorph 36), the outcome of “their reliance on men, the pressures of ‘correct’ feminine behaviour, their lack of a recognized individual identity” (239). Gwenhwyfar, raised according to the ideals of her father and the patriarchal Christian church, has been denied adequate training and agency in order that she be dependent on men. She believes herself worthless except in those areas traditionally associated with femininity, causing her to identify with those activities beneficial to the men in her life.

Gwenhwyfar's most significant responsibility according to chivalry's feminine ideal is having children, and Bradley likens this to the breeding of horses. When readers first encounter Gwenhwyfar's perspective, she sits "on the high wall of the enclosed garden...watching the horses in the paddock below" (Bradley 251). Gwenhwyfar and the horses are both confined to enclosed structures, offering a parallel between their feelings of captivity and associating the upcoming treatment of the horses to the men's treatment of Gwenhwyfar. As the chapter continues, Lancelot arrives to barter for the horses. After inspecting them, he meets with Leodegranz to negotiate, where Gwenhwyfar presents herself in "her best gown...a string of coral beads about her neck" (254). She is putting herself on display as were the horses. When Lancelot then discusses their plans for breeding the horses, Leodegranz comments on his children's marriage prospects: "I have daughters; when the eldest marries, her husband will lead my men into battle, and can train them as he will. Tell your High King to come here, and we will discuss the matter" (254). The implications are clear: if Arthur wants his horses, he will have to acquire them through marriage. The parallels between Gwenhwyfar and the horses, the discussions on horse breeding and marriage, and the atmosphere of negotiations all indicate that Gwenhwyfar is being used as leverage and that her eventual function is not so different from that of the horses: the production of offspring. She is treated like "another mare, a brood mare this time for the High King's stud service, hopefully to provide a royal son" (268). Gwenhwyfar is objectified as a potential mother, and she has no more say than the horses in whether she stays or goes.

Gwenhwyfar recognizes the injustice of this situation and is angry, but her upbringing prevents her from directing that anger towards her father or husband, so she directs it at herself instead. Treated like "property" (268), Gwenhwyfar feels anger "choking her" (268). Because of her father's treatment of her, however, she tries to forgive her father: "*But how*, she thought wildly,

can I complain of the best of fathers, who has only my own welfare at heart?" (256). When this fails, she tries to convince herself that her anger is unjustified: "it was a woman's proper business to be married and bear children" (268). Eventually, failing to reconcile "her needs and her training, she tries to compensate for her feelings of guilt by going overboard in the direction of piety" (Paxson 119). She manages to overcome her anger by recalling one aspect of the myth of woman: "no, she must not be angry, it was not seemly to be angry...she must obey her father's will as if it were the will of God. Women had to be especially careful to do the will of God because it was through a woman that mankind had fallen into Original Sin" (Bradley 268). Her piety, however, only makes her feel worse, because her faith reinforces the binary between the myth of woman's two incarnations: "No woman could ever be really good except for Mary the Mother of Christ; all other women were evil, they had never had any chance to be anything but evil" (269). Believing her anger to be a sin, as opposed to the natural reaction it is, she believes her emotional turmoil is "her punishment for being like Eve, sinful, filled with rage and rebellion against the will of God" (268). Gwenhwyfar has been raised to believe she is the problem, regardless of the circumstances, so when presented with a scenario in which she is unambiguously the victim, she cannot reconcile her beliefs with her perceptions. This causes her to feel anxiety and frustration that she turns on herself, perpetuating the cycle. Her two ideological guides, her father and the church, project onto her the myth of the feminine ideal that they wish her to embody, and she is committed to conforming to these ideals regardless of how she feels.

Gwenhwyfar is famously barren in Arthurian legend, so the reader knows she will never bear the child expected of her. This creates dramatic irony that Bradley uses to bring the unfair expectations of the myth of woman into focus. In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, which explores theatre and dramatic texts but whose principles apply equally well to any

narrative form, Marvin Carlson explains that narrative art “utilizes the recycling of material to encourage particular structures of reception in its potential audiences” (16). Bradley uses her audience’s familiarity with Arthurian legend to create dramatic irony, which depends “entirely upon an audience’s previous knowledge of the story” (28). Because readers know that Gwenhwyfar never bears any children, the text produces “discrepant awareness” (29), which is when the reader has “an understanding that the characters do not have of the future turns of the dramatic action” (29). This discrepant awareness is effective in producing a “full range of emotional reactions...from the amusement felt in farce to the pathos felt in tragedy” (29). When witnessing Gwenhwyfar’s attempts to bear children, it produces sympathy in the reader who knows the outcome. Her frustration as she fails to fulfill an ideal she was never capable of fulfilling must create at least some sympathy in the reader, and it invites questions about the culture that produced those expectations in the first place. Ultimately, it suggests that her eventual manipulation of Arthur is tragic, not malicious, because her intentions are rooted in a desire to provide an heir and fulfill her role as queen as opposed to other, more selfish motives.

Gwenhwyfar’s inability to have children is painful for her, and she is reminded repeatedly of her perceived failure, which drives her into desperate despair. When Morgaine visits Gwenhwyfar, one of Gwenhwyfar’s ladies teases that Morgaine should prophesize “when the Queen will get pregnant” (306). This jest brings tears to Gwenhwyfar’s eyes, indicating that Gwenhwyfar thinks often on the subject. Again, when Arthur comes home his first question is about Gwenhwyfar’s state: “how is it with you, lady, after these many months? I had thought...” (309). Gwenhwyfar cries in answer, afterwards thinking to herself, “Whatever else a queen might do for her lord, her first duty was to give him a son” (309). Gwenhwyfar’s life is dominated by thoughts and conversations revolving around children and pregnancy: “it seemed that every word

anyone spoke, of whatever matter, was an arrow, a taunt aimed into her heart for failing the first duty of a queen” (330). The reader, knowing that Gwenhwyfar will never bear the child she hopes for, can only watch as this burden drives her further into despair.

As Gwenhwyfar fails to produce a child, she inevitably blames herself as she has been taught to do. After a miscarriage in her first year of marriage, Gwenhwyfar begins to fear anything related to sex or pregnancy: “Gwenhwyfar was almost painfully conscious of Arthur’s arm around her waist, the frank eagerness in his eyes. Well, they had been apart a long time. But she felt a sudden sharp resentment. Not once, since that time, have I been pregnant—can he not even give me a child?” (Bradley 316). But the mere thought that Arthur might be responsible leads her to blame herself: “Oh, but surely that was her fault... Somehow, through carelessness, she must have taken illness” (316). This leads her to intensify her self-governance: “Whatever thing she did, whenever she made any decision, however small, if it was of more weight than kid or dried beef for dinner, then was that weight on her soul, that from what she should decide the fate of kingdoms should rest” (335). Regardless of the circumstances, Gwenhwyfar blames herself when things do not go as planned, and so she takes the entire responsibility for producing an heir on herself without ever questioning the fairness of this immense responsibility.

Feeling powerless, Gwenhwyfar turns to her faith for guidance and support, and the more intense her emotional state becomes, the greater she commits to her religious devotion. Chivalry’s martial and social facets have largely neglected her up to this moment, so it is reasonable that she would turn to its final facet, Christianity, for support, guidance, and hope. After her second miscarriage, Gwenhwyfar believes her barrenness is “the punishment of God on her that she did not strive early and late to bring her husband to be a better Christian” (329). She clearly associates her barrenness with her faith, believing that if she were a better Christian, God would reward her

with a child. She believes her greatest sin is her love for Lancelot, and she fears that this love keeps her from being a good Christian: “In God’s name, how could she, a chaste and Christian woman, have such evil thoughts?” (332). Even when Arthur condones the affair, she thinks of Morgause, “who played the whore” (335). Gwenhwyfar wants “to be good, to keep her soul clean and her virtue whole” (335), so she denies herself her greatest desire because she believes God will reward her sacrifice with a child. Her guilt for being barren and her desire for a child draw her self-perception in two separate directions; convinced she is an Eve, but wishing to be a Mary, she finds what de Beauvoir anticipated she would find: “these two destinies are incompatible; she hesitates between one and the other without begin exactly adapted to either, and from this comes her lack of equilibrium” (1272). This lack of equilibrium causes Gwenhwyfar severe emotional anguish: “anger, so violent that it frightened her, swept through her trembling body like a flood” (Bradley 335). She redoubles her religious commitment in response: “She would continue to be, as she was always, a good and virtuous queen and a Christian woman—she would never even think of being anything else” (336). Gwenhwyfar’s ideals afford her no means of coping with the trauma of her barrenness and miscarriages besides her faith, but this faith teaches her to believe that she is the problem, intensifying her distress. This becomes a vicious cycle.

When she becomes pregnant, her pregnancy is miserable as well because she fears that she will again lose the child. Part of this anxiety stems from her faith. When she learns she is pregnant she thanks God: “*It has come, the answer to all my prayers. Oh, thank you, God and Christ and our Blessed Lady!*” (357). But still believing herself sinful, she cannot fully enjoy the moment: “But now in the very midst of her wickedness God has rewarded her when she deserved it the least...And even through the joy in her heart, she felt small and cramped and joyless” (357). Believing that her pregnancy is a gift from God, she equally believes that God can take it away.

Every decision she makes becomes important, as though a single misstep will result in disaster: “she must take very good care of herself, eat well, rest much, make certain that nothing went amiss as it has done before” (361). Consequently, “it seemed that fear was hovering everywhere around her” (368). Her pregnancy is therefore an anxious experience for her, and the reader’s discrepant awareness informs them that all her fears will come true.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of her experience with pregnancy is that she only feels valuable now that she is pregnant, believing herself worthy of respect which should have been due her from the beginning. After learning of her pregnancy she is “eager to tell her news to Arthur, to end for all time the silent reproach that she was barren” (362). She is tired of being thought of as a failure, and her state has given her a new sense of confidence: “*High Queen, and bearing the son of Arthur. Why should I be afraid of anything in God’s world?*” (361). When she sees Arthur smile at the sight of his companions, “Gwenhwyfar thought, with a stab of pain, *Never does he smile at me like that. Yet, when he hears what news I bear him, why then...*” (377). She believes her pregnancy will fundamentally alter her social status in Arthur’s court, so when Arthur tries to send her to Camelot to bear the child, she contests his command: “*My place is here and my son has a right to be born in his father’s own castle*” (373). Gwenhwyfar thought herself a failure unless she could bear Arthur a son, but now that she is pregnant, she feels she is finally entitled to the respect.

The men feel quite differently, however, disregarding her opinion and revealing that they will never see her as an equal because she is a woman. When Gwenhwyfar insists she stay with Arthur on account of her health and her fear of traveling through open spaces (which are only intensified by her pregnancy), Lot feels entitled to explain her own body to her, comparing her (again) to a horse: “Are you breeding, madam? Why, congratulations? But that need not stop you from travelling. Morgause was every day in the saddle, till she was too big for her horse to carry

her.... Our midwives say that fresh air and exercise are healthy for a breeding woman, and when my own favorite mare is in foal, I ride her till six weeks before she drops the foal” (381). The men tell Gwenthwyfar that she must ride, completely disregarding her opinion. This infuriates her because she had thought she finally had some control: “*Once again I must do as I am bid, like any woman, no matter what I want!*” (382). Finally, she must invoke the child to be allowed to stay: “I shall go nowhere until my son is born” (382). Arthur acquiesces, causing frustration among his men: “Gaheris said wrathfully, ‘Arthur, will you let her do this? I say to you, you should bundle her on to her horse and send her forth whether she will, or not! My king, will you listen like this to a woman’s raving?’” (382). Forced to use their unborn child to manipulate Arthur, she has “no sense that she has won a victory” (383), for she feels that it was not her but the child that was given leave to remain. She is likely right. As she comes to recognize, they do not value her, but her womb: “she had thought, if ever she bore Arthur’s son, then he must give her place and show her great respect, not treat her still as that useless woman he had been forced to take as part of a dowry of horses! And yet here she was, packed off into a corner” (389). Even while pregnant, Gwenthwyfar is not heard among the men of Arthur’s court, revealing her status as a second-class citizen.

This frustrating revelation sends Gwenthwyfar deeper into her piety, for devotion seems to her the only act by which she can meaningfully enact her agency. Having stayed at Caerleon, which is little more than an “army camp” (383), she resolves herself to the only course of action in which she feels she has any control: “Once Arthur had promised her that when she gave him a son she might ask him for whatever gift was in his power to give, and she had it in mind that on that day she would ask him to put aside the pagan banner of the Pendragon and raise Christ’s cross” (383). She begins to weave a Christian banner, weaving into every stitch her “*prayers that Arthur shall*

be safe, and this a Christian land from Tintagel to Lothian” (384). In her pregnancy she turns more than ever to her faith, questioning even a visit from “the venerable” (384) Taliesin, the Merlin: “was it right she should have that old pagan and demon worshipper near to her at such a time as this, when she bore Arthur’s son, who would one day be the king of this Christian land?” (384). Having always been denied access to chivalry’s martial facet, and having recently been denied the full privileges of its social facet, Gwenhwyfar commits entirely to the only facet in which she feels welcome, the religious facet, and this sets her up for the miscarriage the reader knows must be coming.

Gwenhwyfar’s emotional turmoil—her frustrations at being ignored, the pressures of pregnancy and her position as High Queen, and her intense fear and love of her own Christian God—these come together and culminate in her miscarriage. The incident begins with a visit from Kevin harper, Taliesin’s eventual successor. Kevin’s “misshapen body” (387) bothers Gwenhwyfar far more than Morgaine’s appearance had, and his druid faith “filled her with dread, as if he would bewitch her and her babe with pagan sorcery” (388). Gwenhwyfar’s prejudices come full circle, her initial bias against non-Christian faiths and non-traditional beauty standards having intensified with her maturity. As Avalon and the Christian church are both fighting for ideological control at this point in the narrative, this moment becomes representative of that struggle. Gwenhwyfar exemplifies the Christian church’s teachings that the druidic faith is wicked, immoral, and grotesque, so when Gwenhwyfar’s hysteria brings forward her miscarriage, it can readily blame Kevin and his community for this disaster, thereby asserting ideological dominance.

When Kevin eventually leaves to speak with Arthur about the upcoming battle, her prejudice and frustration push her emotional turmoil beyond her capacity to bear it: “Gwenhwyfar felt it like a sharp knife run through her belly. Even this malformed heathen might be with Arthur

now, yet she, his wife, must lurk here out of sight, although she bore the hope of his kingdom!” (389). She lashes out at Kevin, losing her wits as her paranoia finally takes over: “Do you think I do not know how you all look at me—like a fool, as if I were deaf and dumb and blind? And you would calm me with kind words while you go behind the back of the priests to claim Arthur for pagan wickedness and heathendom.... Go from here, lest my babe be born deformed because I have looked on your vile face” (390). Gwenhwyfar’s prejudices heighten her fear until she believes that “he had cursed her with those vile serpents, she could feel them stabbing and biting into her body.... She screamed and hid her face with her hands and fell, writhing” (390). She loses the child, blaming Kevin and yelling for a priest in her hour of need: “God help me, send for the priest, the priest, perhaps he can take away this curse—’ and, ignoring the gushing of water and blood that now she could feel drenching her thighs, she dragged herself to the banner she had woven, signing herself with the cross again and again in a frenzy” (390). Between her ideals and her reality, she commits entirely to her ideals: to the role men have assigned for her, to the prejudices and beliefs of her religion, and to the illusions that overcome her anguished mind. Ignoring the reality of the blood that poured from her body, she turns to her banner and her faith.

In the aftermath of her miscarriage, Gwenhwyfar is understandably distraught, believing that “*Now for certain [Arthur] must hate me*” (391). It is here that she is at her most vulnerable, and speaking to a priest, the priest uses her emotional state to manipulate her as she feared the druids would Arthur. She asks, “What can I do that God may send Arthur a son for Britain?” (391). The priest responds by encouraging her to pressure Arthur into committing to Christianity, revealing his own motives as a priest in Arthur’s court. Gwenhwyfar goes to Arthur then and demands that he raise her Christian banner in place of the Pendragon: “God has punished us because he feels we are not fit to give this kingdom another king, you and I, unless we will vow

ourselves to serve him faithfully, not in pagan ways but in the new way under Christ” (392). Arthur resists, insisting on the reality of his prowess: “I have every confidence that with my good sword Excalibur and all my Companions we shall triumph” (393). Gwenhwyfar resorts to playing upon his pity: “‘Ah, I know it well, I am only an encumbrance to you,’ she cried out bitterly. ‘I was never more to you—it is a pity I did not die with my babe...I cannot even persuade you to put away that pagan banner and raise the cross of Christ’” (393). Finally, he agrees to carry her banner, putting the Pendragon aside and beginning the rift that would eventually tear his kingdom apart: “It is not her adulterous affair with Lancelot [sic] but her dogmatic imposition of Christianity that alienates the king and drives the supporters of the goddess to plot his death. In this sense, Gwenhwyfar, like Morgaine, becomes both the victim and the instrument of the deity she worships” (Hughes 25). Gwenhwyfar’s ideals, which she believed would bring her peace, ultimately bring her grief.

Gwenhwyfar, in attempting to fulfill the feminine ideal of the chivalric world becomes a manipulator because she is manipulated. Having been raised to conform to the patriarchal standards of Christian Britain, she submits to the will of men and of the church. When she rebels against these conditions, she punishes herself with guilt until she believes herself the sinful, destructive woman of myth. The myth of woman feminine chivalric ideal has failed her, and she is perceived in at least as negative a light by conforming to it as she would have been had she rebelled. Arthurian tradition has long blamed Guenevere for Camelot’s collapse, but here Bradley “reverses it, blaming chivalric masculinity for the difficulties women have experienced in Western culture” (McClain 197). In so doing, *The Mists of Avalon* reclaims a story “which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters” (Paxson 118). Chivalry, for all its honor, reduces women to their roles as family members, and in doing so it fails to recognize the authentic and

diverse people beneath the myth of woman. *The Mists of Avalon*, in focusing on a diversity of women, aids in rectifying this injustice.

Conclusion

This thesis explores representations of chivalric violence in Arthurian literature. The first chapter discusses Balin's inability to distinguish between brutality and justice, which leads to unnecessary deaths and personal harm in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. At the same time, his violence brought Britain under Arthur's control, creating the conditions in which chivalric culture could change. Balin is both a product of the brutal Utherian era and plays an essential role in ending that era. Thus he represents a complicated narrative of ideological progress that leverages its own faults in pursuit of amelioration. The second chapter argues that while Arthurian chivalry may be less brutal than Utherian chivalry, it still valorizes the virtue of prowess, revealing its dependence on violence for political and ideological stability. Lancelot, the Round Table's chief knight, must therefore enact violence continually in order to maintain his worship, for this worship stabilizes Arthur's reign over the kingdom. This burden emotionally taxes Lancelot, and his reputation causes as many problems as it resolves. Lancelot's name prevents some opponents from engaging with him while it incites others to attack him. Lancelot's position and the Round Table's stability both prove to be untenable as the violence on which their authority is predicated inevitably cause inner conflict and division. Together, these two chapters show that "Chivalry has never prevented violence, not even in the Middle Ages. It only regulates certain kinds of violence against certain kinds of people" (Kaufman and Sturtevant 105). Even from the perspective of the male nobility that it privileges, chivalry cannot prevent the violence it claims to suppress.

The third chapter pivots towards chivalry's influence on female nobility as they are denied access to chivalry's central virtue of prowess. Regulated by chivalry yet refused its privileges, Bradley's Gwenhwyfar must define herself according to the narrow feminine ideal the chivalric ideology affords her. This leads her to fulfill the Pale Maiden archetype, a feminine ideal which

prizes beauty and conformity above all else. Gwenhwyfar consequently devotes herself to the Christian values of patriarchal Britain, believing herself as a woman to be inherently sinful while the men around her are above reproach. As she matures and witnesses the incongruities between these ideals and her lived experiences, Gwenhwyfar succumbs to the emotional turmoil incited by this cognitive dissonance, ultimately imposing her ideals on Arthur in a desperate bid for control. Chivalry, for all its claims of revering women, “requires both passive women and violent men in order to justify its existence, and therefore, it reinforces a hierarchy that takes agency away from women” (Kaufman and Sturtevant 107). The very ideals that claim to protect Gwenhwyfar ultimately impair her by denying her access to experience and training, reserving those privileges for her male counterparts.

In my introduction, I denounced uses of chivalry and medieval history that serve discriminatory political and ideological ends. The invocation of chivalry in white supremacist discourse is alarming, and it also attests to the ongoing need to pay attention to the way in which this medieval ideology has developed over time. Studying literary representations of chivalry at different moments in history reveals that its representation depends very much on the specific perspective of a particular author or group working in a particular context. This approach offers a counterbalance to those who look to chivalry to support universalist or essentialist claims about race, gender, or class since it plainly demonstrates that ideologies are neither natural nor immutable but cultural and dynamic. Its privileging of violence deemed to be virtuous—or at least the potential for violence it deems to be potentially virtuous—also reminds us of the great care that needs to be taken when engaging with figures from any period who valorize chivalry as a way of thinking about the world. As dynamic as chivalry may be, it always invites us to consider the relationship between power and violence, whether physical or structural.

Chivalry also allows us to understand how ideologies impact individuals. Ideological influences are often taken for granted: it takes a conscious effort to perceive how ideology shapes us. Ideologies not only shape us to their ends but also shape the way identities are formed. The concepts of honour and worship function as part of the chivalric ideology not only to encourage individuals to prioritize prowess but also to insist upon the weight that should be placed in the perception of others. Whereas Balin's violence is often perceived as brutal because he does not always consider worship before he acts, Lancelot's preoccupation with worship drives him to engage in violence that might otherwise have been avoided. In both cases, though, their decisions are informed by the way they have learned to conceive of worship. Gwenhwyfar's narrative likewise demonstrates how ideology shapes her way of thinking and how others—especially, but not only, her father—contribute to her understanding of the world. And while Gwenhwyfar's experience might seem remote from today's culture, some contemporary white women would be more than willing to submit to chivalry's unrealistic feminine ideal, "eager to jump on the white supremacist bandwagon, especially when it elevates their own sense of privilege" (Kaufman and Sturtevant 90). While chivalry clearly subordinated women to men, it further subordinated others even further, making their treatment of women seem not only reasonable, but desirable. Ideologies influence subjects in subtle, clever, and sometimes insidious ways, and being aware of these strategies is as important now as ever.

Coming now to the end of this project, possibilities for future study are numerous. This thesis focused on chivalry in Arthurian literature, but the matter of Britain was only one of chivalric literature's three main spheres. How does chivalric violence present itself in the matters of France or Rome? Are chivalry's social dynamics different between the three matters, or are they largely the same? I also focused heavily on characters of noble birth, but the literature includes characters

who reflect a very real and diverse population, and their stories are valuable as well. Medieval Europe's perpetual crusading brought them in contact with peoples from Africa and the Middle East, and the relationship between Christianity and Islam had a strong impact on chivalry's development that demands further study. Chivalry has also been very influential, and unfortunately this has allowed certain groups to use its ideals and imagery towards hateful ends. Understanding chivalry's relationship to modern issues—including, but not limited to, classism, racism, sexism, and transphobia—will be essential to preventing its further abuse. Chivalry also intersects with other major subjects from the Middle Ages. We cannot fully comprehend the knightly ethos until we study how chivalry intersects with medieval Christianity, nor can we understand the knight's mentality until we account for feudalism and medieval politics; this list could go on indefinitely.

The Medieval period may have been (pardon the pun) ages ago, but that does not mean that their experience is entirely different from ours. It was a lively, confusing, diverse world of social anxieties, corruption, and petty frustrations. The people were human, and therefore shared traits with humans living today. Some wanted to stand out, others wanted to fit in; some were concerned with the power they wielded, others were concerned with the power they lacked. Most recognized they would die some day and therefore tried to make some sense—and even the best—of the time they had to live. Chivalry may have developed over five-hundred years ago, but the anxieties and concerns of the people who were immersed in it are as important now as they were then. Chivalry has not proven to be a panacea for those anxieties or concerns in the past, but it certainly did serve to reserve power for a very small number of people by both justifying and limiting their use of violence against certain others. As people seek to revive it, we need to ask whether they hope it will serve the same purpose today or if writers like Malory and Bradley can help us to learn other lessons from it.

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